



ELLIE ST. CLAIR

*Thieves of  
Desire  
Book 2*

A JEWEL  
FOR THE  
TAKING

# A Jewel for the Taking

Thieves of Desire Book 2

Ellie St. Clair



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Also by Ellie St. Clair

About the Author

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# Prologue

## London ~ 1808

If there was an art that Juliet had perfected, it was that of distraction.

Seeing her quarry near, she pushed away from the wall, her fingers playing with the necklace around her neck.

The jewels weren't real and neither was her current character. But that didn't matter. She just had to get through this, and then everything would be well. For tonight was more important than any other night of her life. And not just because of what it would mean for her, Xander, and his entire family.

No, tonight was most important because it was the night she and Xander would announce their engagement. She smiled as she remembered how he had asked her, so shy and tentatively, so at odds with his ever-present charming smile and roguish demeanor. They had been lying in his bed, after he had snuck her in, although she was well aware that it was no secret to his family that Xander had fallen in love with the girl they had taken in and accepted as one of their own.

Before they shared their plans, however, they would finish this one job. The one that his family, along with Juliet, had been planning for months now.

"My lord," she said, curtsying in front of the overdressed man, who had apparently been on his way to the card room, likely finished making his polite acquaintance with all of his guests for the evening. He seemed perturbed at the interruption until he looked down at Juliet. She batted her eyelashes at him. She might feel guilty about deceiving him so, but she knew too much about him to feel anything toward him with the exception that he was getting what he deserved.

Perhaps if he didn't spend all of his evenings at brothels instead of with his wife. Perhaps if he treated his daughters with anything other than disdain. Perhaps if his servants didn't quit two weeks after their arrival because he was so horrid to all of them.

But he did all that without apology, and so, Juliet decided that if they were to rob him of the stockpile of gold he kept in the back of his study — for he was not a man to trust banks — he had it coming.

She just had to make sure that he stayed away while the rest of them completed the theft.

“Who are you?” he demanded, leering at her from beneath bushy brows.

“My apologies for my forwardness,” she said, disguising her voice with her best American accent, “but I simply *had* to meet you after hearing what an impressive man you are. My father is here on business, and I was fortunate enough to be invited to your most magnificent soiree tonight.”

“Of course, of course,” he said, his suspicion somewhat eased. “Your father is—”

“Do you dance, my lord?”

“Not anymore. That’s a young man’s game.”

“Oh, but you seem to be full of youth.”

He blustered a bit, but she seemed to have gotten through to charm him.

“Perhaps, then, a walk on the terrace?”

A smile slid over his face as he agreed, offering her his arm, and Juliet didn’t miss the looks that were sent their way as they passed along the outskirts of the ballroom. Not that it mattered to her. No one here knew who she was, and no one would ever see her again after this night — at least, not if all went according to plan.

As the earl led her along the terrace, despite his proximity, Juliet took a deep breath of air, so fresh after the cloying perfumes of the ballroom. She looked up at the house they had just exited, in true wonder at the amount of wealth possessed by this one man. Growing up as she had, practically impoverished and nearly alone with the exception of a father who had come and gone, she had never been impressed by the wealth that one person could possess. This man’s fortune could feed and house thousands of the people she had grown up with.

But it was not as though anyone had asked her for her opinion.

She just allowed it to guide her actions.

Like relieving men like this earl from some of his riches.

“This terrace was always more for my wife than for me,” he said, proudly showing her his grounds, as well as the majesty of

each room as they passed. “Although I suppose it is advantageous for times such as this, eh?”

Juliet smiled even as she grimaced inside, estimating that she thankfully only needed to keep him occupied for another few minutes. Xander and his brothers would work fast.

Suddenly the earl gripped her elbow tightly — far too tightly for her liking — and began to back her against the wall, into the shadows offered by an alcove.

“My lord?” she asked, her teeth clenched as she realized just what he was doing.

“This *is* what you wanted, isn’t it?” he asked gruffly. “No self-respecting woman just wanders about a terrace, after asking her host to tour her around it. You’re American and all, though, so I understand that *this* is exactly what you would want.”

“My lord,” she said, her anger growing, although not her panic, for she had a plan. It was a last resort, but a plan all the same. “I actually did want to enjoy your company — on a walk. I would ask that you release me, please.”

“You’re a tease, then.” His voice revealed an edge to his words as he pushed against her harder.

“I am not. I—”

Then with a grunt and a swift intake of breath, the earl was gone — one moment his body was on top of her, the next it was replaced by another — one much more familiar and much more welcome.

“Xander,” Juliet breathed. “What are you doing? You are supposed to be inside. You—”

“I saw you pass by the window from a corridor and the lord’s intentions were clear. I couldn’t allow you to continue on with him. It wasn’t safe.”

“Xander, I can look after myself,” she said, slightly lifting her skirt to show the small pocketknife that was resting within the garter around her leg. Xander’s eyes gleamed, although he didn’t look completely relieved.

“Of course you can. We’ve taught you well,” he said, and Juliet rolled her eyes. Xander’s family had taken her in a few years earlier, and they acted as though they were responsible for everything she knew. Which was not entirely true, for she had been looking out for herself since childhood. But that was beside the point.

Suddenly it was Xander who was pulled backward now, and the

earl, despite having a couple of decades on him and having received a blow that had kept him down for a couple of moments, caught Xander with a right hook that had him grimacing.

“Leave me and the lady alone!” he said, pushing Xander once more, and just as Xander let out a growl, it seemed the terrace suddenly became quite crowded, as a few guests noticed the fracas in addition to, it seemed, Xander’s brother Damien, who shoved through the crowd to arrive at Xander and Juliet’s side.

“What’s going on?” he muttered. “Arie heard noise out here and sent me to check. This is not exactly according to plan.”

“We have to get out of here,” Juliet returned. “Is everything finished?”

Damien nodded grimly. “Arie’s waiting out front. We make a run for it in three, two, one.”

As they exploded into action, however, there was suddenly a shout and the retort of a gun firing. Where it came from, Juliet had no idea, but by the time she pondered it, the pain had already shot up her leg, and in shock she realized that the bullet had pierced her thigh.

“Xander!” she cried out, her arms flailing as she fell, her leg failing her, and he, of course, caught her in his arms, lifting her within their safety as he and Damien ran as though their lives depended on it — which, of course, they did.

At some point, everything went black as Juliet let herself go to the pain and the safety of Xander’s arms.

The next thing she knew, she was back in her bed, her leg wrapped tightly. Only it hurt... and she was so hot, her head pounding, the room swimming unfocused around her. She called out for Xander, and in the haze before her eyes she dimly noted the coming and going of her roommate, Mary, until she finally made out Xander’s large frame.

Thank goodness. She could remember now at one point she had come out of her delirious dreams to ask if they had managed to steal the gold. It would be worth it, if she knew that they had tricked the bastard. He had nodded, but told her not to worry, that she needed sleep more than she did any gold.

The heat was beginning to recede, the pain beginning to ebb one morning when she opened her eyes to the sun. She saw Xander through the crack in her eyelids, hovering at the door of her room. She called out to him, but perhaps she was mistaken, just imagining



him, for when she blinked and opened them again, he was gone.

The next time she opened her eyes, she found that her room was dark, nothing and no one within — not even Mary.

Juliet pushed herself to the edge of the bed, swinging her legs over, finding herself weak but at least able to stand — alert mostly on one rather wobbly leg. Using various objects of furniture to balance herself, she pushed herself to the door of her bedroom, her eyes opening in shock to find the common room beyond it completely bare. Every piece of furniture — gone. Artwork — gone. The only thing left was a piece of paper that was affixed to the door.

She hobbled over, gripping the wall for balance as her leg was still fiery with pain.

She took the letter, her eyes running over it quickly.

As the words became clear, she shook her head, trying to deny them. But no matter what she tried, they wouldn't change.

Mary was gone, without apology. That didn't surprise her. Mary had been as much of a thief as Juliet, only one without loyalty.

But Xander... if this was to be believed, Xander wanted nothing to do with her. She had been a part of this last plan, but she was no longer welcome in their family, in their schemes, in their future. She had ruined everything. He was gone, out of her life, and she was to never seek him out again.

Juliet's hand flew to her mouth as she tried to stifle the cry of shock and pain.

But there was no stopping it, and as the strength she had filled herself with flowed away at the fact that she now had nothing to live for, she sank to the floor, helpless, in a ball of misery.

When the knock sounded on the door, despite the painful agony that had filled her breast, still her heart jumped, hoping against everything else that it was he. That there had been some awful mistake, that he had changed his mind and returned.

But when she opened the door and saw his brother, Arie, instead, she knew.

Xander was gone. And he was never coming back.

# Chapter 1

## Five years later ~ Sussex ~ 1813

Xander danced around the outskirts of the ballroom, only his feet weren't in time with the music.

He caught Damien's eye from across the room. They nodded at one another, acknowledging both the role they were playing as well as their true purpose for being here.

A woman nudged against Xander's side, and he murmured an apology, aware that it was not his place to be knocking over guests. Only when she looked up at him from beneath fluttering lashes, Xander realized that it had not been an accident whatsoever. He flashed her an appreciative smile, but he had no time for flirting.

Not tonight, at least.

He lifted his tray as one of the guests placed his drink upon it, and then continued on through the room, remembering all his eldest brother, Arie, had taught him about the nobility and the role he would play as a footman in one of their houses.

The house was owned by a man who was by no means one of the highest ranking men of England, but one of the richest. He had, apparently, done an excellent job over the years of gathering the debts of more than one poor bloke who'd lost far too much at the gambling table. Now the baron owned half of London, most of whom were here tonight despite their lack of goodwill towards him.

"How is the evening?" Damien asked as they passed one another, and Xander merely shrugged. He could think of other ways his night could be better spent, but there were far worse things one could be doing to make a living.

Such as actually working as a footman, spending his life doing another man's bidding for minimal compensation.

No, thank you.

If all worked out here — and he was sure it would for every one of Arie's plans was carefully cultivated, particularly after that one disastrous night five years ago — he and his family would be even richer than they already were.

Xander couldn't stop his eyes from straying to the necklines of women who passed. He wasn't focused on the ample décolletage spilling from the tops of their nearly translucent gowns, however.

No, he was far more focused on all that sparkled above them — earrings, necklaces, and brooches, with the odd ring that flashed as a hand raised a drink to lips.

It was a shame, really, that the style of the day was for minimal jewels, for far too many were tucked away, not available for others to appreciate.

And yet, that was also one of the reasons he had the opportunity to find all of the baron's collection — together, at once — and add to his riches.

Fingers trailed along the back of his neck, and Xander involuntarily shivered as he turned to find an older woman eyeing him with obvious interest. Perhaps the role of a footman wouldn't be so bad after all, he pondered, for there seemed to be plenty of opportunity to avail himself to what these women had to offer — although he wasn't speaking of their affections but rather what they wore. Xander had always had an eye for the finery.

But not tonight.

Tonight he had to maintain his head, to keep his attention on all before him, for there was a much bigger prize available to him. It would require a great deal more time and would not be nearly as fun in achieving, but it would be worth it in the end.

He was told that Harold Raymond, Baron of Wilington, was going to be married soon, that he was courting a woman years younger than himself, one with little prospects but a beauty like no other. Whether she would truly become his wife or, instead, his mistress, the baron apparently didn't care. Wilington had no shame, nor any reason to worry about making a misstep. He was too old to care, and he owned the debts of most of his guests, anyway.

Xander would have admired him had he not treated his staff like dirt and considered himself a gift to all of humanity.

"John, over here!"

Xander turned, remembering *he* was John. Truth be told, all the footmen in the house were John, as the baron had no care to actually remember any of their names. Which was just fine with him, for it meant that when he was gone with what he came for, no one would remember him or Damien or just what they had been doing in the house.

“Champagne!” Wilington called as Xander neared him. The baron stood close to the side of the dance floor, although Xander doubted the man ever wandered onto it himself anymore. Beside him was a man near Xander’s age, black hair slicked back over his head as his stare wandered appreciatively over the woman who stood across from the baron, her back to Xander. The length of her neck was long and pale, the slim curve of her shoulders covered just at the top where they delicately arched beneath the cream fabric of her dress. Despite Xander’s lack of attraction to his other propositions tonight, he had to fight the urge to reach out and trail his fingers along the woman’s soft skin. Xander spotted what he was sure would be two long jewels hanging from her ears, framing her honey brown hair that was loosely tied in a chignon above her neck. That color of hair... it was one he would always be drawn to, that he could never forget. Not after *her*.

He shook his head to clear it as he stepped forward, lowering the tray between the baron and the woman. He knew he should keep his gaze demure, lowered, but he couldn’t help but lift his head to see what this woman might look like from the front. Would she be anything like the woman who insisted on haunting his dreams night after night?

As her fingers curled around the glass and she lifted it to her lips, he looked up, meeting her eyes — and stilled in shock when their gazes collided, as the glass tumbled from her fingers, shattering all over the floor.



\* \* \*

Juliet froze. She felt the smooth glass slipping out of her hand, heard it shatter across the marble at her feet, allowed the drops of liquid to splash across her dress, likely ruining it.

But she couldn’t look away as she gazed into the eyes of the man she’d never thought she would see again.

No, make that the man she *vowed* to never see again. The man who had taken everything from her. The man who had abandoned

her. The man who had broken her heart.

She likely would have remained there, a statue, had Lord Wilington not started bellowing at her.

“Juliet! Look what you’ve done. And you,” he rounded his red, sputtering gaze onto Xander, who was the first to recover as he tore his eyes away from her, “what were you thinking?”

“My apologies, my lord,” Xander said, dipping his head in a manner very un-like the Xander that Juliet had known. Or the man she had thought she had known. “I should have caught it.”

“Yes, you should have. Now, clean this up.”

“Of course, my lord.”

He turned around and began walking away, as Juliet finally looked down at herself. She needed to clean up, yes, but more importantly, she needed a moment to compose herself, to recover from the shock of seeing *him*. Here.

“Excuse me, my lord, but I should retire for a moment.”

She turned before the baron could say anything, practically running from the ballroom despite the many eyes that turned to look at her. Eyes that she was already used to. She knew how uncommon it was for a woman without title or noble blood besides the distant relatives she claimed, to be considered as a potential bride for a man like the baron. But her story was that her father was a wealthy merchant, which Lord Wilington seemed fine with. He cared much more for money than title. His wife had died years ago and he had no care for propriety. He liked to have a woman — a much younger woman — on his arm, to keep up appearances and to show off his vast collection of jewels, if nothing else. He enjoyed being envied, being feared.

Which was exactly what Juliet was hoping for. She needed more time here. More time to finish her task, to find what she was looking for. The last thing she needed was complications.

Complications like Xander Murphy.

She hurried down the hall, around the corner to the stairway, where one of the maids eyed her with contempt. She understood. She was living the life of a woman of loose morals — even if she hadn’t actually taken part in the acts that granted one such a title.

Not only that, but she was here — for tonight at least — in the house of a baron, being paraded around as his woman. He didn’t care much of what anyone thought, but told her that he preferred to have her close by.

Even if it was only for her to show off his collection of jewels and take care of him, like a nanny would a young child.

Just as Juliet rounded the corner and opened up the door to her room, a strong hand grabbed her arm, and she whirled around, ready to fight or to scream, she wasn't sure which.

But instead, she found her heart beating wildly for an altogether different reason as she was trapped within arms that were both familiar and all too welcome when she should have been cursing them.

"Xander," she practically whispered, unable to say his name in full volume. "What are you doing?"

"What am *I* doing?" he hissed, and it was then she saw the storm in his eyes, those eyes that were such a unique shade of blue they were near to purple and far too beautiful for a man. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

Not thinking about her actions, she took his hand in hers and tugged him into her bedroom, looking furtively up and down the hall before she closed the door behind him.

"Aren't you supposed to be cleaning up my glass?" she asked, cloaking her distress and placing her hands on her hips as she turned to look at him. He was dressed in the baron's livery, although she most certainly would have remembered had she seen him around the house before.

"Damien's taking care of it," he muttered.

"Damien's here too?" Juliet asked in surprise before she narrowed her eyes at Xander. "What are you two up to?"

"What are we up to?" he asked incredulously. "Don't tell me that you are actually here because you're sleeping with that awful, decrepit old man."

Juliet placed her hands on her hips, shuddering at the thought of it. "If I was — which I'm not — but even if I was, what business is it of yours?"

"I—" Xander opened his mouth to answer her, but shut it firmly, turning around as he ran a hand through his dark hair — which was far too long and was now beginning to curl around the ends — as he sighed. "I suppose it is none of my business. And yet," he turned to face her now, his mouth twisted, "I hate to think of you resorting to such a thing, Juliet."

"Oh, do you?" she asked, the familiar ache of pain turned anger beginning to coil in her belly. "Perhaps you should have thought of

that before you left me. Alone. Told that you wanted nothing more to do with me. That I should find my own way in life. Left, without anyone to care for me or see after me, recovering from a wound that was inflicted during one of your schemes.”

And with a heart that was so broken she had thought that she would never recover.

“Exactly,” Xander said, holding out a hand as if that was to explain everything, “you were hurt. And I didn’t want you ever to be so hurt again.”

“Very well,” Juliet said, her shoulders dropping as the fight left her, and suddenly she was just tired. Tired and ready to move on from this. Ready to never see him again. She could only pray that he had been hired for this one night alone, for she didn’t think she could continue to see him day in and day out. “You left. I’ve moved on. Our lives have gone their separate ways. I just need to know something, Xander.”

“Of course.”

“Are you just here for this party?”

Xander scratched his head in that way of his that she had always found most endearing, and she steeled her resolve against him.

“I’m here for... awhile. Until we find what we are looking for.”

“Which is?”

“Ah... I’m not sure I can say.”

“Of course you can’t.” She crossed her arms over her chest in an attempt to shield herself from him as dread began to grow deep in her belly. “I must change and return to the party,” she said, even as she wondered where Annabelle was. “You should go. You might be missed.”

“Juliet,” he said in supplication, and she lifted her brows, inviting him to say something, anything. To apologize for the past, to tell her that he had made the biggest mistake of his life. To plead for her forgiveness and explain that he was here because he had to find her again and make everything right. Because he still loved her.

And when he said all of that, she would laugh. Because she would never forgive him. Never. He had hurt her far too greatly.

Her imaginings were just that, however — imaginings. It was as she thought. He had nothing to say. No explanation. No excuse. She walked across the room and wrenched the door open, holding it for him as a sign that it was time for him to leave. He lowered his head

in resignation as he walked toward it, pausing in the frame, inches away from her. "I'm sorry," he said, and then continued down the hall.

Juliet shut the door behind him, leaning her head against it.

She was sorry too. For she knew that as much as she told herself otherwise, she had never gotten over him. And she knew that, despite her best intentions, she never would.



## Chapter 2

“He is what?” Annabelle stared at Juliet, her mouth open wide in astonishment. Juliet’s gratefulness for the woman grew. The two of them had met when they began working at a jeweller’s shop together, where their unlikely partnership began.

Of course, they had different intentions for seeking such employ, and when Annabelle had caught Juliet stealing from the man they worked for, Juliet was certain that she would be discovered and taken before the magistrate.

She had been shocked when Annabelle had instead offered to help her.

One of the best jewellers Juliet knew, Annabelle was integral to this plan and had joined Juliet in the role of her lady’s maid, although Juliet would never actually ask Annabelle to take on any required duties besides fastening a few buttons when needed. Besides, Annabelle had far more important things to do.

“Xander is here. At Lochrich. Working as a footman.”

“I can hardly believe it,” Annabelle said, and neither could Juliet, even though she had been there, seen him, and spoken to him.

She sighed as she looked around them, astonished as always at the tranquility they found themselves in even through such a ploy. While Juliet had a room in the house, for matters of importance the two of them preferred to walk outside, where they could get as far from prying eyes and ears as possible. They were currently on the outskirts of the grounds, the hour long before Lord Wilington’s rising time.

Annabelle’s normally calm, angelic face took on an expression that could only be described as vengeful. “I know I’ve never actually met him, yet I cannot help but hate him for you.”

Juliet turned her head and smiled at Annabelle as they walked along the hedgerow. She plucked a blue berry off the blackthorn before tossing it into the air. The weather was beginning to turn from a somewhat cool spring to a warmer summer and Juliet appreciated the sun streaming down onto her face.

"I love you for your defense of me, you know that. But I can take care of myself — and I can certainly manage Xander Murphy."

When Annabelle and Juliet had met five years ago, Juliet was still recently injured, broken-hearted, and completely alone. Annabelle had seen her at her worst, but it seemed something within her had compelled her to reach out to Juliet, providing her with a friendship that Juliet didn't think she actually deserved — especially once Annabelle found out who she truly was.

"You likely will come to meet him shortly, now that he is working in the household," Juliet considered. "Apparently he isn't going anywhere anytime soon."

"What do you suppose his aim is?"

"Oh, I'm sure it is very similar to what you and I are doing," Juliet said, raising an eyebrow. "Trying to steal Lord Wilington's jewel collection. Xander would never stoop to a position such as footman unless there was something else to gain from it. He may be from the bowels of St. Giles, but there his family is royalty."

"Such a plot would make sense," Annabelle said, before looking over to Juliet with her voluminous blue eyes. "Are you sure about this, Juliet? Can you go through with what we have planned, knowing that he is here, that you will have to see him rather often, that you likely even have the same aim that he does?"

"Of course!" Juliet exclaimed, holding her chin high even as she realized the veracity of Annabelle's words. For the truth was, as much as she told herself she had overcome her feelings for Xander, she would never truly be free of him.

Annabelle seemed to understand this far better than Juliet did herself, for she placed a hand gently on her arm. "It's all right if you can't, Juliet. I know how much you loved him. You thought you were to be married and he left you as though what was between you didn't mean anything. Told you that it was all part of some plan."

"You don't have to be quite so honest," Juliet murmured, the words hard to hear even though she was the one who had imparted the truth of the story to Annabelle. But Annabelle was as straightforward as anyone Juliet had ever met, which was something she had always respected about her, and Juliet appreciated the reminder, especially before she had to see Xander again.

"It's better to hear it from me than to have to face it all over

again with him,” Annabelle said, to which Juliet nodded.

“This is true. I know. And to be honest with you, Annabelle, there is too much between the two of us for me to ever be ambivalent toward him. But — I can do this. I *have* to do this. And now I have additional motivation, for I must prove that I can do this even with Xander attempting to take it all away from me. For once we are finished with this, we will be able to support ourselves for the rest of our lives. Imagine, Annabelle, not having to worry about whether or not we marry. Not having to work for men who make our lives miserable. Having the freedom to do as we choose, when we choose. To travel where we wish.”

She turned to Annabelle, who was now wearing a dreamy smile to match Juliet’s own wide grin.

“Can you see it?”

“I can,” Annabelle said, before her smile slid away and she dipped her head. “I just hope I can do a good enough job on my end.”

Juliet stepped toward Annabelle and placed a hand on each of her shoulders, looking her directly in the eye.

“You are the best jeweller I’ve ever met,” she said fiercely, needing Annabelle to understand the truth of her words. “If you were a man, you would have the finest of shops that the wealthiest of people from all of England and even the Continent would come to buy from. Never doubt yourself, because I certainly do not.”

Annabelle’s lips curved slightly, and Juliet wasn’t sure whether she was pleased or laughing at Juliet’s enthusiasm. “Thank you, Juliet.”

“You’re welcome,” Juliet said resolutely. “Speaking of which, how is the bracelet coming along?”

“Brilliantly,” Annabelle said, her eyes lighting up now as she spoke of her true passion. “The paste diamonds catch the light just as the true ones do. I should have it ready in a day or so.”

“Wonderful.” Juliet beamed. “Remind me to ask Lord Wilington if I can wear it again.”

Originally their plan had been for Annabelle to recreate new jewellery from what the baron gave Juliet as gifts, which they would then sell with, hopefully, far less suspicion. They would continue the scheme until Juliet would be forced to give the baron an answer as to whether or not she would marry him, at which point she would disappear.

The baron, however, was smarter than they had given him credit for. One evening in London shortly after their courtship began, following a well-planned introduction in which Juliet had conveniently encountered the baron in the lobby of the theatre, he had informed her that he would most appreciate seeing his jewels adorn her body, but they would be on loan. She would have to return them at the end of each evening before they bid one another farewell.

It was then she and Annabelle had concocted a scheme in which Annabelle would create replicas of each piece of jewellery that Juliet was given for the evening. Annabelle would meet her — at the opera, the theatre, whatever party Juliet found herself at — and she would do her best to make a quick sketch before recreating the piece as fast as she could. Juliet then just had to hope she would be given the same jewels again at another date — only at that point in time she would be prepared to return the replica and keep the original.

When the invitation to attend the house party had arisen, with it came an opportunity better than any they could have imagined. For here, somewhere on the grounds, were all the jewels held together. If they could find them, then this could be over before Juliet had to do any more groveling or allow the baron's hands to wander over her. She had managed to keep him at arm's length thus far, but she could tell that he was growing impatient.

In the meantime, this also meant that, quite fortunately, there were far more opportunities for her to be gifted jewels, even if it was just for a dinner or an afternoon affair. Juliet and Annabelle were finding their small treasure of jewellery beginning to expand, as the baron's collection grew to include nearly as many forgeries as legitimate pieces. Juliet was just beginning to worry that sooner or later they were going to be found out.

"Is everything all right?" Annabelle asked as though reading her thoughts, and Juliet nodded smartly. Annabelle had enough to worry about with recreating the jewels. Juliet would take care of the rest. Especially if that rest included a certain tall, handsome thief with too much charm for his own good.



\* \* \*

Xander and Damien stood to the side of the garden, ready to provide any service necessary as they watched the guests milling about during the outdoor breakfast.

“Did you find anything last night?” Xander asked, to which Damien shook his head. While Xander had been busy trying to determine just what Juliet was doing at Wilington’s Lochrich Estate — and to keep his wits about him while doing so — Damien had been busy searching the corridors behind the house.

They hadn’t been at Lochrich long when they had quickly realized, from years of experience, that the house was not all it seemed. The width of the rooms were too short and they had deduced that there must be secret passageways hidden behind the walls. They had discovered an entrance through the baron’s study, which had been the most likely place, for the door was always locked.

Fortunately, due to Wilington’s love of spirits and the butler’s list of tasks, he had provided Xander with a key, and the duty of keeping the sideboard well stocked.

From that entry point, however, they were disappointed. For while the passageway took them from one room to the next, most of the doorways were locked. Locks were not usually a problem for Xander, as he could pick the average one in seconds, but these were not average locks. He had written Arie, requesting him to send special tools from London, and could only hope they would arrive at the village’s post office quickly. The irregularity of their design only added to the intrigue of Wilington’s collection.

Intrigue that should make this all worth it.

“Are you going to tell me about Juliet?” Damien asked, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other as he tugged at the collar of the livery, reminding Xander just how itchy it truly was.

“What about her?” Xander asked, crosser than usual, but Damien knew him well enough to simply roll his eyes.

“Do I really need to question you about this?” Damien asked,

crossing his arms over his chest, causing the fabric of the jacket to stretch over the breadth of his shoulders with a most uncomfortable sound. "Why is she here? And what is this going to mean for us?"

"She is apparently here because the baron is courting her." Xander attempted to keep his voice neutral.

Damien's eyes widened in astonishment. "That old prick of a man?"

Xander couldn't help but chuckle.

"Yes, unfortunately," he said wryly. "I, however, have a feeling that I know the exact truth of why Juliet is here. For the same reason we are."

"What does that mean for you?"

"What do you mean?"

Damien looked at him with knowing exasperation.

"You might think you fooled us all, but we know why you left her, Xander. You didn't want her to be part of the life. Of our life. You thought she would be better off without you. You were never the same after she got hurt."

"Perhaps," Xander said gruffly. He had wanted them all to think it was because he had no wish to settle down with one woman. But Damien was much closer to the truth.

"Are you going to tell Arie?"

"She has nothing to do with Arie," Xander said sharply, hearing the vehemence in his voice but unable to help it. Their brother was not known for seeing anything beyond the figure in front of his eyes when it came to a big steal. He also had never been completely supportive of Xander's relationship with Juliet and had been quite adamant that Xander did the right thing in leaving her.

Xander turned to Damien. "Don't say anything to him."

Damien held up his hands in front of him. "Of course. But be careful, Xander."

"I will," Xander said. "But I must make sure she gets out of here safely, despite what happens with the jewels. Like it or not, it is my fault she got into this life, and one way or another I will get her out of it this time."

"Of course," Damien murmured.

"As for tonight—"

He stopped talking as his notice was suddenly caught by an all-too-familiar presence coming up the walk. She kept herself away from the rest of the crowd, standing close to a woman who Xander

didn't recognize. Juliet wore a soft pink muslin gown, nothing like the brilliant fabrics she had worn when they were together. Although when they had been together in those days, she had usually been playing one role or another, depending on what scheme they had currently been involved in. Until she had been hurt, her life put in peril, and she had nearly died because of him.

He had left her enough to make a new start for herself. So why was she here, now? She couldn't truly want a man like Lord Wilington... could she? As though reading his thoughts, Juliet looked up now and again, and gone was the innocent expression of a woman trying to impress a lord who wanted a gullible beauty.

No, when she looked up, assessing the people before her and the house in front of her, it was with the face of the woman he had known five years ago. The woman who had been his perfect partner in every way. The woman he had loved, who was his equal, who he had never been able to get over.

And it was in that moment, he *knew* without question. Juliet was here for the very same reason he was.

"What was that?" Damien asked, a smirk on his face as he followed Xander's gaze.

"I was just saying tonight we will try a few more doors. Perhaps even this afternoon one of us can go in through the passageway we found in the study."

He fished through his pockets for the keys to give to Damien, as Damien waited patiently.

"Is something wrong?"

"I can't find my keys," Xander said, looking around, panicked for a moment.

He looked up, seeing Juliet on the step just as she was about to enter the house. As though feeling his gaze upon her, she looked back and met his eye. Then with a slow smile, she reached into a pocket within her dress, pulling out an object and holding it up before her between her finger and her thumb.

Xander could only grin as he saw the keys hanging from her fingers.

# Chapter 3

Juliet looked furtively around the hallway before letting herself into the baron's study. It was one of the few rooms she had yet to search, for it was always locked, and while she had become rather proficient at lockpicking from her years with Xander, the door was in a rather conspicuous location and she was worried about getting caught.

The key turned in the lock like butter, and she let herself into the study, instantly wrinkling her nose at the smell of spirits and aged papers... but not the aged papers of a book that had been shuttered away in the library but of papers that were near rotting.

She allowed her eyes to adjust to the dark room, then crossed it and pulled back the curtain to allow a bit of light in. She had no idea what she would say if Lord Wilington were to enter and find her here, but he was currently in the midst of a luncheon that she had managed to steal away from, excusing herself by saying she felt unwell.

There wasn't much apparent beyond the few bookshelves, a massive desk, and a sideboard. Juliet walked around the room, running her fingers over the shelves, trying to find anything of note. She checked the desk for secret drawers, anything the baron might be hiding. A special closet, perhaps? She doubted this would be the room in which he'd hide away a treasure trove of jewels, but then why did he keep it locked at all times?

She walked over to the bookshelves, pushing against each shelf to see if there was anything suspicious. Nothing. Except... she eyed a row of books that were lined up all too perfectly, while the rest of the shelf contained books that were rather scattered as though they had been thrown there. She pushed on the tight few. Nothing. Pulled backward and... she yelped as the entire bookshelf began to turn, moving until it was standing perpendicular to the room. Without considering too carefully what she was doing, Juliet lit a candle, picked up the holder, squeezed through the hole, and then pushed the shelf closed behind her.

She raised the small flame and tried to see exactly where she



was and what was around her. There was no other sign of light, and the passageway was not overly high. She could imagine that anyone with a bit more height would have difficulty walking through without pulling his back..

She wondered if Xander and Damien had discovered the passageway, a smile teasing her lips at the thought of the two hulking men crouching through the tunnel.

Juliet took tentative steps forward, the dirt floor not offering anything that might trip her, but still she was slightly trepidatious as she wondered just how long it had been since someone had been here, and what she would do if she did happen upon another. Her light caught something to her right, and she turned to find that she was standing in front of another door, this one with a complicated lock.

*What could the baron possibly be hiding behind here?*

She hadn't realized she had murmured the words aloud until a voice answered her.

"We've been trying to figure that out ourselves."

"Xander!" she cried out as she placed a hand over her rapidly beating heart, turning to find him standing just behind her wearing a grin on his face, Damien a step behind him, shaking his head as he rolled his eyes at his brother.

"You scared me half to death," she admonished.

"Well, that's what happens when you find yourself somewhere you shouldn't be."

Juliet straightened her neck and shoulders, which she took great delight in as Xander couldn't possibly do the same in this small tunnel.

"I could say the same thing for you."

"Yes, well, I, at least, was given a key to the study," he said, raising his eyebrows in challenge. "One which no longer seems to be in my possession." He gave her a stern look as he held his palm out in front of him. "Give them back."

"But—"

"Juliet," he eyed her. "I will lose my position if I do not have my keys."

"Perhaps that would be best for all of us."

He made a sound low in his throat that could only be described as a growl, while behind him, Damien coughed into his hand, and Juliet had the impression that he was trying to stifle a laugh.

She sighed dramatically. "Very well." She reached into her pocket — a pocket that she had ensured was sewn into each and every dress for items such as these — and tossed the keys at him. "But you must tell me more about this passageway."

"Oh, must I?" he said, this time just one eyebrow rising, as Damien reached out and placed a hand on Xander's shoulder.

"We'd be happy to," Damien said, which earned him a brilliant smile from Juliet. She had always liked him. "Come, we'll start this way."

The pair had obviously spent some time in these passageways, and Juliet begrudgingly found that they moved with ease despite the restrictions due to their height. They held their candles aloft, but showed her the various doors, describing the rooms beyond. Some, Juliet had already visited or searched; others were still a mystery.

Thankfully, the baron's bedroom remained one of those doors. She was surprised, however, to find that it was the most heavily barricaded.

"Our suspicion is that the baron is hiding something in his suite," Damien said, pointing to it.

Juliet nodded, her brows furrowed. "I suppose it would make sense."

"So tell me, Juliet," Xander said, folding his arms and leaning back against the wall across from the door leading to the baron's bedroom, "are you here because of the baron's good looks and winning personality? Or is there another reason you find yourself at Lochrich, playing the role of a kept woman?"

His expression was guileless in what Juliet was sure was supposed to be an innocent gaze, but she knew better. Xander was as great an actor as he was a lock picker. He could convince any maid to share all of the secrets of her employer, could charm the most happily married woman into giving him everything he could ever ask for.

And now he wanted to know her secrets. After everything he had already taken from her.

Yet, when she looked at him, she couldn't help the warmth that pooled in her belly as she remembered everything that they had been to one another, everything she thought they had shared, all of her emotions that were still wrapped up within him. She had convinced herself since he had left her that it had all been a lie, that

he had been deceiving her as he had every other person who came into his life.

She just didn't know why. But now, seeing him here in front of her, she knew what had been missing, and she was determined to fill that hole. She would learn why he had made the decision he did, even if it meant finding out that Arie had told her the truth — that Xander simply didn't love her and had only been using her for their scheme. She needed to hear the words from his lips, for her own sake if nothing else.

She reminded herself why they were all here at the moment, however, and straightened her shoulders as she eyed them, wondering if perhaps she might get more from Damien than Xander.

"Are the two of you inclined to share just why you are working as footmen in the house of a man like Lord Wilington?"

She could barely see Damien, however, as Xander's solid frame blocked her view.

"Perhaps we will answer you at the same time you tell us just whether or not you are really going to follow through and marry the man."

She and Xander stared, their gazes fixed on one another, locked in a silent battle of wills.

Damien finally cleared his throat.

"I think we can all confess that we are here for the baron's legendary stash of expensive jewellery, can we not?"

When both Xander and Juliet looked at him in surprise, he shrugged. Juliet remembered that he had always been the peacemaker of the family. "It's not much of a secret. Perhaps we would all be better off if we worked together rather than against one another."

Juliet considered him and his idea for a moment before returning her attention to Xander.

"He's right, you know," she said, lifting a hand in front of her. "I can access places that you can't, and you can keep an eye on things that I don't have the ability to."

Xander didn't say anything for a moment, and Juliet got the impression that something was bothering him, something he first needed to resolve.

"Before we agree on anything, I have to ask, Juliet," Xander said, his eyes darkening for a moment, "do you have access to the

Wilmington's bedroom?"

Silence reigned for a moment, heavy in the dark corridor, and Juliet studied him in return as she tried to figure out just why he would suddenly care.

"No, I don't," she said, before tilting her head. "Although, I suppose I could try to, if it was absolutely necessary, although I refuse to sleep with him."

"I would *never* ask you to," Xander said with more vehemence than she could ever remember hearing from him before. "In fact, I would hope you wouldn't."

"What does it matter to you?" Juliet asked, shrugging a shoulder, even as she inwardly grinned at his displeasure. He may have left her, but it seemed there was some lingering jealousy on his side as well.

"It just... I wouldn't... that is, I—"

He rubbed at his temple as Damien started laughing. "I haven't seen Xander this upset in some time. It's good to have you back, Juliet." He began to lead the return journey down the passageway.

Xander waved a hand in front of himself, gesturing for Juliet to follow as he took up the rear, an uncharacteristic frown on his face as she passed.

"We're wasting time," he muttered. "Damien and I will continue to determine just how we can get through these locks without the baron or his valet noticing. The damn valet is always there, always has his eye on everything. I'm beginning to give up on his ever leaving. The best opportunity would be during dinner, but that's when we are required more than ever."

"I'll try to come up with something," Juliet promised. "How can I let you know if I have an idea, or ask you a question without raising suspicion?"

"Outside, near where you were walking with your friend this morning, there is a small gazebo," Xander said, and Juliet hid her smile at the realization he had been watching her. "If you ever need to talk to one of us, give us a nod when you see us serving at the table. We'll meet you later that evening, at midnight in the gazebo."

"Very well," Juliet said, not wanting to give him the benefit of knowing that he had come up with a rather good plan.

They passed the study door she had used to enter, continuing on until they came to another door, this one without any locks.

"There's a small parlor through here," Xander explained,

brushing past her to open the door, the warm skin of his hand grazing against her hip as he did so, causing heat to rush through her, starting from where he touched her. "This is the best way to enter as it doesn't seem to often be in use and there aren't any locks. I'd imagine it was kept open because the baron likely assumed no one would ever see it from where it's located. The passageway is easily hidden from the room, which is currently to our advantage. Even if someone is within, you'll emerge behind the sideboard."

He pushed open the door, entering first. Juliet was about to follow when Damien placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Juliet," he said softly in her ear, so low that Xander would never be able to hear it, "there is something you should know."

"Oh?" she asked, lifting a brow as she turned to him in surprise.

"Xander still loves you."

Juliet's mouth rounded into an O as her ears began to ring, her shock growing at hearing the words.

"He does not."

"He does," Damien said with an emphatic nod. "I've never seen him with another woman the way he is with you."

"Then why did he leave me?" she hissed, but just then Xander called softly through the passageway to ask if they were coming, and Damien nodded forward instead of answering her question.

Juliet couldn't even look at Xander as she walked by him. For what Damien said could never be true.

Even as the words lit the tiniest flicker of flames deep in her belly, amongst embers that she had thought were burned out forever.

# Chapter 4

Xander and Damien had been arguing for the past hour.

“Why would you show her that?” demanded Xander. “Share with her the entire passageway, tell her everything we are doing, without once asking me whether I thought we should?”

“You could have refused.”

“And what, look like a bastard?”

“A bit late for that, isn’t it?”

Xander lifted his head sharply at that. Damien had never expressed his opinion on Xander leaving Juliet, not like Calli had, but it seemed had his opinion been sought, it would have been much different from Xander’s decision.

“Well, it worked out, didn’t it?” Damien countered and it took Xander a moment to return to the present and realize he was speaking about their sharing of information. “She is here for the same reason, and now she can help us. We can figure this out and be away from here much faster.”

“Yes, but—”

“But what?”

Xander nearly growled. He hated to expose his fears, even to his brother. But there was no going back now.

“Now she is in even more danger than before.”

Damien placed his hands on his hips, a knowing grin on his face now as he stared at Xander. “So that’s what this is all about.”

“What?”

“You’re worried about her.”

“I just don’t understand why she is even here,” Xander said, throwing his hands into the air, suddenly needing Damien — *someone*, really — to understand. “I’m going to tell you something, Damien, but you must promise me that you will not tell Arie.”

“Very well.”

“Or Diana.”

Telling their sister was basically like telling Arie himself, for she shared everything with their eldest brother, even if it was at the expense of another of her siblings.

“Of course.”

“When I left Juliet, I left her everything I had. Nothing that belonged to any of the rest of you, but every pound I had saved to someday start another life for myself. I thought she could begin anew, find a man who was worthy of her, settle down and start a family, live a life where she wasn’t constantly worried about being sent to prison or being struck down by a bullet.”

“And yet, here she is, trying to steal another man’s jewels.”

“Here she is, still in the life.” Xander sighed as he walked to the window of the small room that he and Damien shared in the servants’ quarters of Lochrich Estate. “My intention was always to keep watch over her, to ensure she was well, but soon after I left her, she just... disappeared.”

“Maybe there’s something we can do for her,” Damien said, walking over, removing his jacket and working his powerful shoulders in circles. The livery didn’t properly fit either of them, but Damien had additional bulk. “Chances are there are a couple of jewels in the collection that Arie doesn’t know about. We can let her leave with them.”

“Arie knows everything.”

“Well, we can do what we can.”

They were both silent for a moment as they contemplated Arie’s uncanny ability to gather knowledge. They both respected him like no one else — how could they not, after he had rescued both of them, along with Diana and Xander’s true sister, Calli, from a life on the streets — and yet they loved and feared him in equal measure.

“There’s something else. I heard the stablemaster say that the baron has asked for the gig to be ready earlier than usual tomorrow.”

“Oh?”

“They’ve planned a luncheon for the entire party, but he wants to drive alone,” Damien said, looking at Xander meaningfully. “With his woman.”

“Juliet.”

“Yes. It would be the ideal time for us to try to get into his bedroom, but...”

“Wilington is not known for his manners,” Xander said, putting it mildly as he raised a hand to his head. “What do you think his intentions are with Juliet?”

"I've no idea," Damien said, shrugging his shoulders. "I just thought you should know."

"Damn it," Xander cursed, wondering just how he was going to look out for Juliet while also taking care of what he needed to do. "Knowing him and the way most young women have fled... Would you mind, Damien if I—"

"If you followed along?" Damien smiled as he shook his head, and Xander was grateful that it was this brother here with him. Their family was one that Arie had pieced together. None of them were blood related save for Xander and his sister, Calli, but she was now married to a duke, of all people, and out of the family business. Xander saw her occasionally, but it wasn't the same. Yet, he was grateful for Damien, who he had become closer with now than ever before.

"You look after your woman," Damien said, at which remark Xander eyed him with some chagrin. "I'll try to get into the baron's room."

Xander didn't like leaving Damien alone. But at least Damien could look out for himself. Juliet had also proven herself capable, but if Wilington had help from the footman or another...

"We've done all we can for tonight," Damien said as he tucked himself into the bed that was far too short for him, his feet comically hanging out over the edge. "Try to get some sleep."

Xander threw himself down on the adjacent tiny bed, similarly unable to get comfortable. But it would have to do — for now. Someday, when he had earned the greatest prize of his life, he would buy himself the largest, plushiest bed he could find.

Although it would be rather lonely with just him.

But he didn't have a choice. He closed his eyes, willed himself not to think of *her*, and instead tried to find some peace in sleep.

For there was certainly none to be found in his waking hours.



\* \* \*

Juliet looked at Lord Wilington out of the corner of her right eye.



He had his gig ready today, and he had insisted that the two of them leave for the drive alone, even though the house party guests were expecting them to lead their adventure. It was not exactly an idea that Juliet welcomed, but she didn't see how she could decline. Not when she was supposed to be seeking marriage to the man — an event she hoped to stave off for as long as she could, for it would mean the end of their plan, as she would be immediately exposed when she refused to go through with it.

"It's a lovely day," she attempted with a smile, to which he only grunted in return. Unless the conversation was regarding his vast fortune, gambling debts, or the latest political gossip, the baron was not particularly inclined to engage.

"Your gig is quite a vehicle," she said. She had been surprised when it had pulled up out front. She couldn't recall him ever driving himself anywhere before and had assumed this carriage would be better suited for London. She had quickly become suspicious, however, and had insisted that her lady's maid — Annabelle — accompany them. The baron, however, had been quick to inform her that there was no room in such a vehicle, which she saw for herself. He told her that all would be proper, as other guests were invited to join them shortly in their own carriages, but Juliet was no innocent miss. She was well aware how easy it would be for him to veer off or need to stop for a moment. When she asked if Annabelle could ride on the top of one of the other carriages, Lord Wilington hadn't seemed particularly pleased, but he begrudgingly didn't argue with the staff and other guests nearby. Annabelle was climbing to the top of one of the nearest carriages as they departed, and while she would far rather be hiding away in Juliet's bedroom working on the latest jewels, she had insisted this was of the utmost importance.

"You say we are going to the neighbouring estate?" Juliet now asked the baron as they set the horses in motion.

"Yes." He nodded. "They've invited us to luncheon."

"How lovely," Juliet said, attempting to maintain the façade she had built of an empty-headed woman who only served to please. It seemed to be what the baron preferred.

"The man's not much of anything but he owes me money," Lord Wilington said. "I'll see if he'll pay up today." He cracked a rare smile. "Or I might win a bit more."

"Lovely," Juliet repeated, although the sentiment was anything

but. The baron lived for his fortune. And his jewels. "I'm glad that a few others were able to accompany us."

"Couldn't help themselves," he grumbled, to which Juliet nodded.

The couple in the carriage behind them, however, were people Juliet could do without. Mr. Shiplack had seemed to ingratiate himself with the baron and had struck something amiss in her intuition, though she got along fine with his wife. Juliet actually felt somewhat sorry for her. The woman did whatever her husband wished, which didn't always seem to be in her own best interests. But Juliet supposed that was a risk of marriage. It was why she vowed to always be able to support herself.

The neighbouring estate rose up in the distance, and Juliet breathed a sigh of relief as it neared. When Juliet turned to look over her shoulder, she found that luckily the Shiplacks' carriage was still in view, as was that of Annabelle and the third couple, Mr. and Mrs. Arrington, about whom Juliet couldn't complain, although they most certainly were not anyone she would ever choose to spend time with, as pompous and arrogant as they were.

Suddenly the baron lurched to the side, and Juliet gasped as he was thrown into her so abruptly that she nearly fell out the side of the gig.

"My lord? Are you all right?" she asked, and he nodded as he righted himself. "Apologies," he said, huffing out a breath. "I became off balance."

Juliet nodded, although she watched him closely. She wondered about his health, yet at the same time his jaw was set most determinately.

"I think I must stop for a moment," he said, slowing the horses and sending them far off the path and in behind an outcropping of trees — one of the few along the way — and Juliet tried to assess him and just what his intentions might be.

"Are you feeling unwell?" she asked, keeping lightness in her voice, and he cleared his throat as the horses stopped.

"Actually," he murmured, turning his head as a wicked smile curled his lips, looking quite malicious on him, "I am feeling quite well indeed."

He leaned in to kiss her and Juliet couldn't help her reaction. She leaned so far back that she nearly fell off the seat once more, catching herself just in time.

“My lord,” she said, bowing her head so that she didn’t have to look at him — and also to prevent him from attempting the kiss once more. “I hardly think this is seemly. We are close to your neighbours, and everyone will be passing by us. Plus, my maid—”

“Is in your employ,” the baron said, his dark grey eyebrows furrowing low into a V. “Therefore, it shouldn’t matter what she thinks. I’ve been courting you for a month, Juliet, with nothing to show for it.”

“Nothing to show for it?” Juliet said with a gasp. “My apologies, my lord, but I don’t seem to understand just what—”

“That’s it,” he said, menace filling his voice, “you *don’t* understand. You are staying with me because of my benevolence, do you understand me? Yes, my plan is to marry you as I suppose I could use an heir and you’re at least attractive and don’t ask too many questions. But I need to try the goods before I buy, do you understand?”

Juliet had to snap her jaw closed after realizing her mouth had fallen open in astonishment. She looked side to side for help, but Annabelle and the other carriages were too far in the distance now to see them nor hear a cry for help. She was on her own.

“What’s it going to be?” the baron bit out, and Juliet was frozen in indecision for a moment. Her every inclination was to tell the baron just exactly what he could do with all of his orders, but then this would all come to an end. He would send her packing, and she and Annabelle would be left with nothing to show for the time and effort they had already put into this charade.

She had to use her cunning to get through this, even as the baron seemed more determined than ever, beginning to paw at Juliet’s gown. She backed up again, only this time she didn’t nearly fall off the bench — she actually did.

As she tried to brace herself to hit the ground behind her, suddenly she was plucked out of the air by a pair of very strong — and very familiar — arms.

“I’ve got you,” Xander murmured in her ear, as he held her for a moment longer than necessary before setting her down on the ground, feet first.

“What is the meaning of this?” the baron grunted as he looked down from the seat to see Xander’s arms still around Juliet.

“Mr. Arrington asked me to accompany him to assist his driver,” Xander said, his face as cheerful as always, his explanation

practiced without any hint of deceit. Juliet was amazed at how easily the story rolled off of his tongue. “When we arrived at Lord Bainbridge’s, we were concerned when we couldn’t see your gig. I said I would come and ensure all was well.”

The baron huffed, picking up the reins again.

“All is fine,” he said. “Come, Juliet.”

Xander squeezed her waist from the side, where the baron couldn’t see the action, before helping Juliet back up to the seat. “I’ll stay close in case you need me again,” Xander said instead of asking the baron, who grunted in reply. Xander seemed to take that as his assent before setting off beside them in so quick a jaunt that Juliet’s eyes widened in astonishment.

As much as Juliet somewhat resented the fact that Xander obviously believed she couldn’t look after herself, she could admit that she was relieved to know he was here. For now Lord Wilington wouldn’t be trying anything else — at least, not today.

It did tell her one thing, however. Her time was running out before she would have to do something she had no desire to do.

She might not have as many morals as other young women, but she did have a few. And those, she vowed to uphold.

# Chapter 5

Xander hadn't realized just how long a luncheon could be.

At least he had been fed in the servants' quarters. But he was still on edge from what he had witnessed when he came upon Juliet and the baron. If he hadn't gotten there in time, he wasn't sure what would have happened. Or what could happen in the future. For if Wilington would go to such lengths with his entire house party as potential witnesses, what would he ever do if he managed to catch Juliet alone? She seemed capable of keeping Wilington from following through with any of his attempts and Xander would guess her strength was equal to the old man's, but if she had to fight him off, what would be the resulting consequences?

Xander had no idea, but this entire scheme had become far too complicated with Juliet's involvement.

Finally, it was time to leave. He managed to briefly catch Juliet's eye, but she only nodded at him quickly, obviously not wanting to draw any attention to their communication. While all of the house guests had driven, it was not a far walk, and Xander actually appreciated the chance to stretch his legs outdoors — while he could keep an eye on Juliet.

Now that they had returned to Lochrich, he needed to talk to her. But first he had to find Damien and see if he had discovered anything.

They had a moment alone while they prepared to serve dinner, and Damien seemed rather gleeful, if such a thing was possible.

"I think I know where the safe is," Damien said. "There is a small closet in the baron's room — one within his dressing room. It seems innocent enough, but there is a space next to it that doesn't seem right. There is no explanation for what's behind that wall. And it seems as though it would be where we might expect the door from the tunnel to lead. I snuck into the bedroom while the valet took his tea. That man is like a sentry."

"Can we enter from the dressing room?" Xander asked, his heart beating faster, but Damien shrugged his shoulders.

"If there's a way, I can't figure it out," he said, "although I didn't

take a particularly long time in there, as I was without a lookout. If we have another chance, we can try again, but we might be best to attempt it from the tunnel entrance instead. I've never known a lock to evade you, brother."

Xander nodded, guilt flooding him anew that he had left Damien alone, exposed, when he was the one who had failed thus far.

"How was everything on your expedition?" Damien asked, and Xander explained to him what had occurred. Damien cursed.

"At least we can take some joy from the fact that we are stealing from a bastard," he muttered, to which Xander nodded with a grim smile.

"Although we've got to get this finished as fast as we can," he said. "We have to get Juliet out of here."

"What will she think when we leave with the stash?"

"I don't know," Xander said. "But I left her everything I had once before. Whatever we allow her to have will have to be enough."

Damien didn't look convinced, but didn't say anything more as they left the room to serve dinner. Another dinner Xander would have to spend trying to remain focused on someone other than the only woman he would ever love. And the only one he could never have.



\* \* \*

Juliet knew she should thank Xander for his timely rescue, as much as she hated actually *requiring* that rescue. As she left the dinner table after another excruciating meal, she looked up and caught his eye. She gave him a slight nod, which he returned with wide, surprised eyes. Juliet then had to spend the next three hours making conversation with women who cared about nothing more than the latest *ton* gossip, even though most of them had nothing to do with the noble set about whom they were conversing.

She nodded and smiled, having no idea of whom they were speaking, although she was rather intrigued when they mentioned

that the Duke of Hargreave had recently married “some upstart” who had been working as his governess. Good, she thought, wishing the woman she didn’t know all of the best of luck to face those who would most likely do all they could to make life difficult for her.

Finally, it was midnight, and after explaining to Annabelle where she was going, Juliet slipped out into the dark of night, crossing the expanse of green to the gazebo at the edge of the grounds.

Juliet’s heart was beating fast when she saw Xander’s silhouette through the light of the moon, which was full tonight as it stared down at them through the warmth of the summer. It was one thing to see him in passing in full view of the entire house party. Even their small glances, as much as they connected them, posed no threat — besides that to her own heart.

But the thought of meeting with him out here, alone...

*He left you, Juliet, she reminded herself. Alone. Injured. With nothing. After he had promised you a life together.*

She squared her shoulders as her stride became more determined while she walked toward the gazebo. It was rather romantic, she had to admit, in its octagonal shape and lattice work that slightly obscured the figure within. Ivy vines grew up the side, wrapping around the posts and making it seem that the gazebo was part of the garden itself.

The perfect place for a romantic tryst. Except Juliet was not that woman who held such romantic notions, she reminded herself. Not anymore.

Xander must have seen her coming, for he stepped forward into the entrance of the gazebo, leaning against the wooden post as he watched her. Errant locks of his dark hair flopped over his forehead most endearingly and he grinned that charming grin at her that always caused her stomach to roll over. It was no different now than it had ever been before.

He held out a hand to her, which she reached out and took, allowing him to help her up the step into the gazebo. A thrill ran through her from the touch of their skin against each other’s, and she shivered despite the warmth of the night.

“Are you cold?” he asked, his voice husky.

She shook her head as she attempted to grasp hold of her emotions. “Not at all,” she answered, closing her eyes for a moment, reminding herself that she was here to thank him and to

determine their next steps forward. That was all. "Thank you for meeting me."

"Of course," he said, his violet eyes boring into her. "Anytime you need me."

She had needed him. Five years ago — when he had left her.

Their eyes locked and Juliet didn't speak for a moment, forgetting everything she was going to say, lost in his eyes and memories of all they had been to one another, all that they had felt for each other.

Unbidden, a memory stirred, of the night that she had realized that her regard for him was not just the unrequited tenderness a young woman might feel for a young man.

The setting was nothing like this. They had been in a dirty alleyway, outside of the club where Damien had just finished beating his seventh challenger in a battle of fisticuffs. During the match, Xander had made his way through the crowd, lightening pockets while Juliet had distracted the men so they wouldn't notice — not that he really needed her, so light was his touch.

They were celebrating their success when Xander had picked her up and twirled her around. As her skirts swirled around her, her heart had pounded at his closeness, and when his lips had pressed against hers, she knew that at the age of eighteen years, she had found the man she would be with forever.

She closed her eyes now, trying to will away the love and lust that surged through her at the remembrance of what it had felt like. She missed him. Missed his charm, his wit, the way he loved her and made her feel as though she was the only woman in the world.

But it had all been a lie.

She cleared her throat and her mind, returning to the present and just why she was here when she should be abed, preparing for another day.

"I just wanted to say thank you. For coming back for me today and arriving in such a... timely manner."

He grinned at that. "I saved your bottom from some mud, is all."

"Yes. Well, you likely also prevented the baron from attempting to take any more liberties."

Xander's grin faded and his eyes darkened at that. "I did, Juliet, but I might not be there the next time he tries. What are you going to do if he does?"

She sighed, walking to the side of the gazebo, wrapping her



hand around one of the posts as she stared out at the dark expanse of garden beyond. "I share your concern, Xander. It is not that I cannot prevent him from what he is attempting, but if I do so then my entire plan will be ruined."

She sensed rather than heard him come up behind her. He placed his hand just above hers around the post, his body so close yet not quite touching her, and it was all she could do to keep herself from leaning back against him.

"So abandon this plan," he said, his breath tingling the top of her ear where it lightly brushed against, like the tiniest whisper of wind on an otherwise perfectly calm day. "Leave this estate and go back home to London. Damien and I will take care of the rest."

She turned around, disconcerted by just how close he was, but he refused to take a step back, trapping her between his body and the half wall of the gazebo behind her.

Juliet arched an eyebrow, refusing to be overcome.

"And if I do such a thing," she said wryly, "I'm so very sure that you will be sharing all of the spoils with me."

She could have sworn his cheeks reddened ever so slightly, but he nodded. "Of course."

Juliet snorted and pushed past him. "I learned long ago that I can never believe anything you say. At one time I would have, but now I know that the lies roll off your tongue even more easily than any other truth."

"Juliet," he said in supplication, reaching out and taking her hand in his, pulling her back toward him, "I would never lie to you."

"But you *did*," she said fiercely, pointing a finger at him. "You told me that you would always be there for me. That you would always look out for me when I needed you. And the time I needed you the *most*, you *left me*."

Xander reached out and took her pointed finger within his hand, gently folding it back down among the rest of her fingers.

"I know, Juliet, and I'm so sorry. You have to believe me." He looked at her with such entreaty that she nearly did — until she remembered just who he was and what he was capable of. "But you have to understand. I left you because I thought it was the only way I could protect you. You were injured because of me. You nearly died. I didn't want anything else to happen to you. I couldn't *let* anything else happen to you. I thought you could start a new life,

that you could find a better way. And yet, here you are.” His voice took on a desperate edge. “You have to know how much it’s killing me that you are here, putting yourself at risk yet again.”

“I need this, Xander,” she implored him, hoping that there was something within him that still cared enough that he could be moved to understand, to take pity and allow her to have what she needed so badly. “You have your family, have plans and other prizes to rely on. I have nothing. This is it. Every last pound I had was spent on making myself presentable, making myself into a woman that the baron would want. And it’s worked — so far. Annabelle and I have come so far already. Please don’t ruin this for us.”

Xander stepped forward and brushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear. “Let’s work together and share it, then. I won’t ruin it for you, Juliet. But let me help you. Please.”

“I—” She should say no. She should tell him that she would never trust him again, that he had ruined any chance for them to work together again, for her to ever believe a word he said.

But when he looked at her like that, in this garden setting with the scent of the lilacs surrounding them and the light of the moon illuminating his silhouette as the memories of his touch, his taste, his embrace assaulted her anew, she found that it wasn’t within her to say no.

Instead, when his head bent close to her and his lips descended toward hers, it felt more natural than breathing to lift her head and meet him halfway.

And, oh goodness. His kiss was everything she had remembered it to be. His lips were paradoxically soft yet firm, searching, tasting, drawing everything from her — all of the longing that had been stored within her for five years now, waiting. For him.

She lifted her hands to clutch his shoulders, her fingers sinking into the fabric of the jacket he wore, no longer the livery of the baron but fabric that was soft, fine, familiar, his scent clinging to it and now around her, within her.

She could tell herself all the lies that she wanted — that she hated him, that she would never trust him again, that she had moved on and cared nothing for him anymore.

But this kiss proved just how great of lies she was telling herself. For when he kissed her like this, his tongue already finding entrance, searching, stroking, seeking hers, she knew that he had

ruined her for all others and that, for the rest of her life, she would only love one man. The man right in front of her.

He grasped her in his arms, holding her tightly against him as though he would never let her go, and in this moment she most certainly had no wish for him to ever do so. She wanted to stay here, with him, and agree to everything he asked of her, if it would mean that she could have this again, that there might be a chance for the two of them to possibly be together.

Even though she was better than that. She was smarter than that. She needed to understand that this was the last and only time this would happen.

But damn, did it feel good.

# Chapter 6

“Are you going to tell me what happened out there last night?”

“Nothing,” Xander grumbled as he and Damien stood outside of the baron’s billiard room, where he was entertaining Shiplack. There was something about the man Xander didn’t quite trust, and he had been glad when the butler asked him and Damien to wait and help with anything that might be needed. “Juliet thanked me for my timely interruption of the baron’s intentions upon her. Then she agreed that we can work together on finding the jewels. She didn’t seem particularly pleased about it, nor inclined to trust me, but the truth is, I believe there is something that she isn’t telling me.”

“That she’s purposely keeping secret?”

Xander nodded, looking over at Damien as he pulled at his jacket, already looking forward to the day when he would no longer have to wear it.

“She’s hiding something. I just don’t know what yet. I will soon, though.”

“Very well,” Damien said, characteristically not pushing, for which Xander was grateful.

“John! Get in here.”

Xander and Damien shared a look. “Am I John or are you John?” Damien asked.

“I think we both are,” Xander said grimly. “I’ll go.”

He walked through the door, finding that Wilington was nearly falling out of his chair, while Shiplack seemed rather pleased with himself.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Fetch us another bottle of brandy.”

“Of course, my lord,” Xander said, looking beneath the sideboard, where he found a bottle that was likely worth nearly as much as one of the pieces of jewellery he was searching for, which would be wasted on men too drunk to appreciate it. He pulled it out, uncorked it, and served Wilington and the merchant who was wealthy for reasons that Xander was not actually aware of.

He made to leave, but the baron barked out, “Stay, in case we need you.”

“Very good, my lord,” Xander said, actually pleased to have reason to remain and perhaps discover more about Shiplack’s interest in the baron. It was an unlikely relationship, and there must be more involved. Xander hadn’t heard anything to suggest that the baron owned any debts of Shiplack, and he didn’t know why such a man would have any interest in the baron’s company. It wasn’t as though he was particularly pleasant to converse with.

The two quickly forgot him, as the wealthy always did servants, and returned to their conversation.

“I’ve been quite lucky with my dealings from London,” the baron slurred. “Your main contact has done an excellent job with his appraisals. Many of the jewels I bought for even less than I could have imagined! And they do look ever so fine on what’s-her-name.”

“Your Juliet,” Shiplack said, and Xander did not appreciate the gleam that overtook his eyes as he said her name. He was suddenly overcome by the urge to cross the room and wipe her name off the man’s lips himself.

“Right. Juliet. Her name doesn’t really matter when she looks as she does, now, does it?” the baron asked, laughing as drops of brandy trickled out of his mouth and over his jacket. Shiplack smiled grimly.

“You still planning on marrying her?”

The baron shrugged. “I should. I need an heir, one my first bloody wife should have given me. But if I have to take her as a mistress instead, so be it. If the title goes to a cousin, what do I care? I won’t be here anymore.”

Xander tried to take deep breaths as his heart raced and his hands clenched into fists. He reminded himself that he was here, so none of this was ever going to happen. He would make sure that there was no potential of Juliet being taken by either of these men.

There was only one man who would ever know her taste or the feel of her body against his.

And that was him.

The ferocity of the unbidden vow struck him, even as he reminded himself of all of the reasons he had left her to begin with — to take her from this life, to prevent her from ever having to face men like Wilington and Shiplack again, to find a man worthy of

her.

Before he could finish the thought, the baron actually did fall out of his seat, and as he sprawled on the floor, Shiplack looked down at him without expression and took another sip of his drink.

“Well, I suppose that is my cue to head to bed,” Shiplack said, stepping over the baron as he finished his brandy and placed it on the sideboard next to Xander. “Take him up, will you?”

At that, he left, Xander’s eyes boring a hole of hatred into his back.

He looked down at the baron, heaved a sigh, and went to find Damien.

The two of them dragged Wilington — who was actually much heavier than he looked — up the steps to the first floor, then down the hall to the wide door at the end. They deposited him on the bed, then looked around the room.

“Where’s the closet?” Xander asked, he and Damien coming to the same thought without words that this would be the opportune time to search the room.

Damien pointed across the room, Xander following him to look within.

“You see that part there? It doesn’t seem right.”

Xander nodded, running his hands over the paint to try to find a crack.

“Keep a look out, just to make sure his valet doesn’t come in,” Xander said. “I’ll see what I can find.”

Damien nodded and left the closet, leaving the candle behind him as Xander tried to inspect every inch of the wall to see if he was missing anything. Nothing, however, seemed particularly forthcoming.

He lifted the candle and looked closer, finally seeing the small seam where it should open. But how, Xander had no idea. He cursed as he pushed, pulled, tried every way he could think of, but nothing happened.

“Xander,” Damien hissed from outside. “Footsteps coming from down the hall.”

Xander slipped out of the closet, joining Damien in the main room just as the valet entered.

“Oh, you are here,” he said. “Did you... bring my lord into the room?”

“We did,” Xander said, nodding, “he’s all yours now.”

At least they wouldn't actually have to undress him.

The valet nodded, apparently accustomed to such a task, as Xander and Damien left, no better off than they had been before. Xander took one last look back at Lord Wilington, wrinkling his nose. One thing was for certain. He would get Juliet out of here. Then he would make sure that she would never have to live a life like this again. Only this time he would make sure that he helped plan her life, that he set her up somewhere she deserved, where she would never have to rely on such schemes.

Even if that meant she would be out of his life for good.



\* \* \*

"Oh, here, let me do that."

Annabelle crossed the room and lifted the pins out of Juliet's hands, despite her protests.

"Annabelle, I told you that you would not actually be working as a lady's maid when you have much else to do."

"Perhaps, but we could finish your hair in half the time if I helped you."

Juliet sighed as Annabelle's deft hands quickly began pinning Juliet's light brown hair into a much cleaner style.

Soon Annabelle smoothed her hands over it as she looked above Juliet's head into the mirror with a smile. "There we go."

"Thank you," Juliet said, before rising and allowing Annabelle to help her fasten the buttons at the back. "I don't know what I would do without you."

She meant that in far more ways than what was obvious, which she hoped Annabelle was aware of.

"Well, because of me we are gathering quite a collection of jewels," Annabelle said with a gleam in her eye. "We just need to switch out a few more. I've the diamond bracelet ready, as well as the gold earrings with the emeralds within. Hopefully if you wear green tonight, the baron will give them to you to wear."

"Hopefully," Juliet murmured.

“What’s on your mind?” Annabelle asked, tilting her head and looking at her shrewdly.

Juliet sighed. “I told Xander that we would work with him, except I haven’t shared the second step in our plan — that we have been slowly replacing the pieces. If he ever does break into the baron’s safe, he will find a fair amount of fake jewellery amongst the collection!”

Annabelle walked over and placed her hands on Juliet’s shoulders, looking her square in the eye.

“Juliet. When I met you, you could barely walk after taking a bullet in your thigh. One that was placed there while you were acting as a distraction for that family. And not only that, but he left you alone. With nothing. I’ve never seen a woman so broken-hearted. You told me that you would never trust again, let alone trust *that* man. Don’t let him charm you into believing him all over again.”

Juliet listened to the words, watched Annabelle’s lips move, heard everything she said that then echoed around her head. And yet still, her heart held out hope that she had been wrong. That Xander had left her because he had no choice, that he had been honest when he now said he was just trying to create a better life for her.

But then she remembered her visitor. The one who had arrived shortly after Xander had left. Who had told her that there was no place for her in his brother’s life, that she needed to accept that her future was far from Xander, that she was his weakness and had made him soft.

She hated Arie Hondros nearly as much as she had come to hate Xander.

Except there was no underlying love for Arie. No memories except how terrible he had been to her, how insensitive. How he had practically thrown money at her, had told her that if she took it, it would be her agreement that she would leave Xander and the family, to never see them again.

She had thrown it back in his face, had told him to leave.

He had done so, although not without warning that she should never enter Xander’s life again.

Well, he needn’t have worried, for she had no desire to do so.

“You’re remembering,” Annabelle said with a nod of her head. “Good. Because I don’t want to ever see you like that again. And we



have come too far to be tricked by such a man.”

“Right,” Juliet said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

“You look well now,” Annabelle said. “Go. And bring back some emeralds.”

# Chapter 7

Juliet could feel his stare upon her as she entered the drawing room. She tried to look away, but he was like one of those paintings in which the person within seems to be staring at you no matter where you walk in the room.

When she lifted her head to take a glass from a tray, she caught his eye. When she pretended to laugh at something Mrs. Shiplack said, he filled her vision. When she stood for dinner, she could feel him watching her as she walked.

When they entered the dining room, Mr. Shiplack abruptly took her elbow. "Come," he said, "sit next to me."

It was then Juliet purposely met Xander's eye, saw his jaw tighten and his fists clench at Mr. Shiplack's touch on her, though he could do nothing. Neither of them could — not until this was over. It was just a dinner, Juliet told herself as she allowed Shiplack to lead her to the table. He placed her on the end as he sat down next to her, the baron at the head of the table on her other side. Mrs. Shiplack was across from them, and Juliet managed a smile for her, as she would be the one person who would have to get her through this dinner.

At least the baron had given her the earrings to wear tonight. He told her they were one of his favorite pieces, and would she please show them off for him. She had smiled, keeping herself from rolling her eyes at the fact that he saw her as little more than a showpiece upon which to display his riches.

Now Juliet just needed to find a time to slip away to meet Annabelle and exchange them before his valet asked her to return them.

A dish was placed in front of her, and Juliet had to force herself to keep from turning to look behind her when she smelled and sensed Xander's presence. His arm brushed against the bare skin of her neck as he drew his hand away, and she was comforted by the fact that he was here, that she wasn't alone.

She might not be able to trust that he wouldn't leave her empty-handed, but she knew that he would never allow any harm to come

to her.

A memory surfaced, unbidden, of the first time she had met Xander. She was usually so deft, but she had been mid-pickpocket when she had been distracted by the man's wife. The woman had been wearing a necklace of emeralds and rubies — even then, Juliet had been unable to resist the lure of beautiful jewels.

The man had turned, catching her wrist in his grasp. Juliet had cried out, dropping the coin she had retrieved. When she had looked into the nobleman's face, she saw the lack of pity, the disgust for her. When he vowed to take her before the magistrate, she believed him.

And then there was a commotion to the side. A young man and woman began yelling at one another, right in the middle of the street. At the first hint of distraction, the man's grip had loosened, and Juliet had been lifted and carried away.

Somehow, she had known not to be frightened. Then Xander had placed her down, smiled that wide, charming smile at her, and she had known that everything was going to be all right.

For the next three years, he had always been there. Her friend. Her protector. Never more, except in her heart. Every look, every touch, reminded her that she was no longer alone, that she would always have him.

As she felt right now.

The moment she was warmed by his touch, however, something brushed against her leg, and she jumped when she saw Mr. Shiplack smile slyly at her. Juliet swallowed hard as she shifted her legs as far from him as she could without hitting the baron's.

The dinner was excruciatingly long, but fortunately she managed to ask Mrs. Shiplack enough questions that the woman chattered on and filled the time and the silence. Finally, it was time for the ladies to retire to the drawing room, and Juliet breathed a sigh of relief. As they were about to pass through the door, she nearly looked to Xander and nodded to him but before she could do so, a loud crash sounded from behind them. She turned in surprise with the rest of the ladies, only to find the baron had fallen out of his chair to the floor.

Juliet stood staring for a moment before realizing that she should likely be much more concerned. She hurried over to him, making it there just as Xander and Mr. Shiplack did. The three of them looked over Lord Wilington for a moment, finding that he was

breathing but unable to determine just what might have caused his collapse.

“Did he drink too much?” Juliet asked as she noted just how grey his skin currently was.

“I doubt it,” Mr. Shiplack said, while Xander waved Damien over.

“He doesn’t look well,” Xander said, sharing a concerned glance with his brother. “Perhaps a physician should be called.”

The whole of the room turned to look at Juliet, and she realized they were waiting for her to make the decision. Fortunately, the butler entered at that moment, and together the two of them decided that it would be best to fetch the closest one they could find.

“Just in case,” Juliet said, trying to smile reassuringly to the rest of the party. “I’m sure Lord Wilington is just fine.”

The truth was, however, she wasn’t sure at all. He had been looking weaker and paler over the past few days, but she had assumed that the house party was just taking its toll on him.

Now she wondered if it was something far more serious.

The physician should be able to tell. She followed Xander and Damien up the stairs as they carried the baron up, unsure of what else she should be doing. She was not the lady of the house, and yet there was no one else who would fill the role.

She stepped outside of the room, not wanting to wait within but knowing she should be near when the physician arrived.

When the baron’s valet entered, Xander joined her outside in the hall. Damien followed, but at some unspoken signal from Xander, continued past them.

“Are you all right?” Xander asked in a low voice, looking around to ensure that no one was near.

“I think so,” she whispered back. “But what do I do? If something happens to him, I cannot stay here.”

“No,” he said, “but he seems to be a survivor if nothing else. Damien and I have a plan, but we will have to work quickly. We are working on the locks, but it might take some time as I’m waiting on other tools. There is something else, however.”

“What’s that?” she asked, raising her brows, wondering just what more there could be.

“We’ve discovered something. Something that tells us that we are not the only ones after the jewels.”

Juliet's mouth dropped open. "But how could that be? Who else would—"

"I don't know," he said, running a hand through his hair, apparently truly vexed. "But we have to find out. To keep you safe, if nothing else. When we have a chance, I'll show you, but until then, you must be careful, Juliet. Keep far away from Shiplack. I don't trust him, and I don't like the way he looks at you."

"Neither do I," Juliet murmured with a shudder. "But he is married and he is the baron's closest friend. There is no reason for him to threaten me with anything."

"Oh, there's plenty of reason, just none that I feel like going into at the moment," Xander said grimly. "We'll have to discuss it later, for here comes the physician now."

As he turned, he placed a hand on the small of her back for a moment, and Juliet was comforted by both his touch and his presence, as much as she was disconcerted by what it might mean.

The physician, a tall man with wiry grey hair and glasses, strode down the hallway with bag in hand.

Juliet greeted him, introducing herself before she and Xander followed him into the baron's bedroom. Juliet explained what had happened before the man began examining him. The silence was nearly unbearable. It was not that she overly cared about Lord Wilington, but she did not want to see anyone lose their life, even if it was a man like him.

The physician was partway through his examination when the baron's eyes flew open and he suddenly shot up in bed.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"My lord, you know Mr. Anderson, the physician? He has come to see you after you collapsed following dinner," Juliet explained.

"I don't need the *physician*," he said, staring down the man, who seemed troubled but stepped back when Lord Wilington pushed his hand away.

"My lord, I would implore you to reconsider," Mr. Anderson said, pushing his glasses up his nose. "I believe you are quite ill. Your heartbeat is rather erratic."

"Only because I am annoyed at having you all hovering around me as though I am an ill child! Leave me."

"My lord, I would suggest that the best thing for you at this moment would be rest."

"Rest?"

"Yes, my lord," the physician implored. "Rest and try to recover your health."

"I will do no such thing."

"I really think—"

But the baron was already waving him away, calling for his trusted valet, who came running.

"Everyone else, get out," the baron ordered, and Juliet and Xander exchanged a look. "I said *out*! Juliet, come back in the morning."

"Of course, my lord," she murmured before following Xander out the door, the physician in her wake.

"Thank you, Mr. Anderson," she said, embarrassed despite none of it actually being her fault. "I apologize. Lord Wilington is a proud man."

"I have lived in these parts all my life, Miss—"

"Simpson."

"Miss Simpson. I am aware of the baron's temperament. If he does not want assistance, there is nothing I can do. However, I believe he is a very sick man. I can't say what, but there may be something wrong with his heart. If his condition worsens at all, please summon me. In the meantime, try to ensure that he remains in bed and refrains from any vigorous activity."

"I shall do my best," Juliet said with a small smile before seeing the physician out the front door. Xander remained in the background, out of sight but still there in support.

Finding the foyer void of any other guests or servants, she walked over to him, looking up at him in supplication.

"What am I to do now?" she asked, throwing her hands up at the side. "I am not the lady of the house, and yet who else is supposed to look after everything?"

"You could go home," Xander said, though not unkindly. "I promise you, Juliet, I will look after everything."

"And I will help you," she said firmly, but before they could speak any further, a voice bellowed down the stairs.

"John! John! Come up here!"

"I suppose that would be you?" Juliet asked, arching an eyebrow, to which Xander grunted.

"I suppose it would be. I wonder what the man could want."

"Best to find out."



\* \* \*

Xander hated the smell of the baron's room. It was like tobacco smoke and a cloying perfume. How the valet spent day in and out in the room, he had no idea, but he was just grateful the open job at Lochrich had been as footman and not the valet.

"My lord?" he said, opening the door, finding Lord Wilington still in bed, although his face was a bit ruddier than it had been earlier. The valet stood to the side as sentry.

"John, get in here."

Xander steeled himself against his annoyance at being spoken to in such a manner, but he reminded himself that he was the servant here, and he had no cause to object.

"Yes?" he said as he came to stand at the edge of the bed.

"I need your help. Something in this house is not right."

"Oh? In what regard?"

"I believe someone is stealing from me."

Xander smoothed his expression over his surprise. He was certainly planning on stealing from the baron, but he hadn't actually done so yet.

He thought of the cottage, one that he and Damien had happened upon the day before. It had, at first, seemed deserted, a strange building hidden at the back of the baron's estate. Could that have anything to do with it? Was someone using it to hide whatever they were stealing?

"What causes you to believe such a thing?"

"I cannot say for certain. But I can feel it."

Xander nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Perhaps the baron was more alert than Xander and Damien had given him credit for, even considering his poor health.

"What would you like me to do?"

"I want you to keep an eye on things. I am sending home most of the guests so if it is any of them, it should no longer be a problem. In the meantime, I would like you to see if there is any suspicious behaviour, and if there is, to put a stop to it. You're a big

man — you and the other one I hired with you. Do whatever it takes.”

Xander nodded. “Very well.”

“Good. And John?”

“Yes?”

“Do not tell anyone we spoke of this, do you hear me?”

“Understood, my lord.”

“Go now. Return tomorrow and tell me what you find out.”

“Very well. I hope you are able to rest, my lord.”

The baron’s only response was to snort as Xander walked out of the room.



# Chapter 8

Juliet was miserable. It had been two days, and the baron had called upon her constantly. To bring him something to eat. Something to drink. Something to read. Whenever she left he would call her back, and she was only grateful that his valet was constantly near so that she was, at least, not alone with him the entire time.

Why he expected her to wait on him when he had an entire staff she had no idea, but she was not in a place to argue.

She wished Xander was here with her, but she had no idea where he was or what he was doing. She also hated that she cared so much about his whereabouts.

Which was why, when she went to take her own supper that night, she was relieved when he intercepted her, taking her arm and steering her into an empty parlor.

"Xander," she said with relief, wiping a hand across her forehead. "Where have you been?"

"I've been helping most of the guests to gather their things and depart," he said. "As you know, all are leaving but the Shiplacks."

Juliet crossed her arms over her chest. "As happy as I am not to remain alone with Lord Wilington, I wish it wasn't them who was staying."

"I wish the same," Xander said, nodding grimly. "What has it been like with Raymond?"

"Excruciating," she said with a wince. "But safe. He has not tried anything untoward, his valet is always in the room, and at least I am away from Mr. Shiplack."

"That's a small blessing," Xander agreed. "I must speak to you about something."

"What is it?" she said, worried to see that Xander's face was troubled, which was not a usual look for him.

"The baron believes someone is stealing from him."

"Oh?" she said in surprise as her heart started to quicken. "Why?"

"He said it's a feeling he has. Tell me, Juliet, have you taken

anything yet?”

“No,” she said, but at Xander’s probing stare, she found that she couldn’t completely lie to him. “Not really.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that there may be the odd... trinket that I have stored away.”

“Well, be careful,” Xander warned. “He has asked me to keep an eye on things for him, and now that he has sent most of the house party away, he thinks that he will be able to determine just who the thief is. The baron may seem weak, Juliet, but I believe he likes that feeling of power, and I wouldn’t want to think about what he might do if he found out that you weren’t being honest with him.”

“Of course I am careful,” she said, rather indignant that he would think her some amateur who would so easily get caught. “I’ve learned well over the years, Xander.”

“Fair enough,” he said with a sigh, running a hand through his hair as he reached out and pulled her closer. “I’m not trying to tell you what to do, Juliet. I just... I worry about you. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I know,” she said softly. “And I understand.”

He trailed a hand down from her cheekbone to cup her chin, before he lifted her face up to look at him. He searched her eyes for a couple of moments before he tilted his head down and softly pressed his lips against hers. Juliet sighed into him, not pushing away as she should be but relishing all that he offered her, all that he provided. She may never see him again after this — nor did she want to — but she would enjoy this. She would worry about how much it would hurt to leave later.

He ended the kiss just as gently, before giving her one last quick peck on the forehead, and then leaving the room, shutting the door behind him. Which was just fine. For Juliet had much to think about and much to plan. She needed to find Annabelle — and quickly.



Xander was actually grateful that most of the guests had left, for it meant that he and Damien had a slight bit more ability to wander the house and grounds unnoticed.

The problem with the baron's current ill health was that it meant that he spent nearly all of his time in his bedroom, making it nearly impossible for them to get close to the jewels. Having not yet received the tools they were waiting for, he and Damien had decided they might have to try to force their way in, but the noise would alert anyone nearby.

Even if and when the baron left his room, there was the valet, always about, and Shiplack, who seemed to have far too keen an eye.

"Has anyone been in there recently?" Xander asked, gesturing to the cottage beyond where they walked, just visible in the fading light.

Damien nodded his head. "I found a bag with clothes, documents... it looks like someone is preparing to leave."

"But who?" Xander asked, lifting his hands to the side. "It cannot be the baron. He has nowhere else to go, and why leave a place where you have everything?"

"Unless he has angered the wrong people and he fears for his life."

"There is that," Xander agreed.

"But you are most worried about what would happen to Juliet if he were to flee."

"That is part of my concern, yes," Xander admitted. "We have no idea where she fits into his plan. We need to get this done. One of us needs to keep a watch on Wilington. If we can get him out of his room and wait for a time the valet is otherwise occupied, then we can go ahead and try to get in through the passageway door."

"That is where Juliet could be of help," Damien noted. Xander agreed with him, and yet he was loath to involve Juliet any further in this scheme than they already had to. But what other choice did they currently have?

Suddenly a rustling came from their right, and Xander and Damien exchanged a look. There was no wind that evening, and he doubted there were many creatures about. Not on these manicured lawns.

"What do you suppose that was?" Damien murmured, and Xander shook his head, unsure.

“I’ll go take a look.”

He crept along the hedgerow as stealthily as possible until he reached it, then stood abruptly — and found himself face to face with Juliet.

“Xander!” she exclaimed, placing a hand over her heart. “You nearly scared the wits out of me. Again.”

“I did?” he asked with some astonishment. “And just what do you think you are doing out here?”

“I am...” She seemed to struggle for an appropriate response. “I am—”

Before she could answer, a voice sounded from just beyond where they stood. “Juliet, where are you? It’s hard to see within these trees. I—”

Annabelle emerged, her mouth remaining open but her words gone when she came face-to-face with Xander. Her blond hair was pulled back away from her face, her dress dark as she was obviously trying to hide in the darkness of the night. As Damien quickly flanked her other side, she looked over to Juliet for direction, but there wasn’t much she could say, for in her hands she held a valise that seemed to be rather heavy.

“Going somewhere?” Xander asked, his voice mild, although he couldn’t help the inquiry within it.

“Nowhere at all. Just out for a night stroll,” Juliet said, her attempt at duplicity obvious. She could be rather good at it, but she had never been able to get anything by him — he always knew when she was trying to hide something.

He remembered the time that Calli had tried to surprise him for his twentieth birthday. She had convinced Juliet to distract Xander — that, of course, had not been particularly difficult — but he had known, from the moment she asked him for some time alone, that she was planning something.

He had been right, of course, although he had never told her, preferring instead to see the joy on her face when she thought she had so expertly helped surprise him. That night, with all of his family and friends, and, of course, Juliet, together celebrating with him had been one of the best nights of his life.

“Annabelle, a pleasure to see you again after our ride atop the carriage together,” Xander said, flashing Juliet’s friend his most alluring grin, and Juliet narrowed her eyes at him, which he enjoyed a little too much. He stepped closer to Annabelle, who tried

to hide the heavy valise behind her back. "Tell me, what do you have there?"

"New gowns for Juliet," Annabelle said, but her assurance was quite obviously wavering.

"They seem awfully heavy," Xander noted. "Why don't you allow me to carry them for you?"

"Oh, I couldn't," Annabelle said, shaking her head. "You must have much to do. Juliet and I are fine, we—"

"I insist," Xander said smoothly, and before Annabelle could argue any further, he reached out a hand and took it from her as she gasped.

A smug smile crossed his face as he hefted it and walked over to one of the benches that dotted the landscape of the baron's green.

He already had most of the latches open before Juliet could even say anything.

"Now, see here, that is my personal property, and I will not have you—"

But there they were, all the jewels glistening even in the dim light. Xander looked up at her with incredulous eyes before turning his forced smile on Damien.

"Well, well, looks like we have ourselves quite the haul." When he addressed Juliet, he tried not to let her see his hurt that she had so deceived him. She had made him a promise, but it was obvious she had planned to betray him. "Juliet, you forgot to let Damien know about the plan."

"This plan was in place far before the two of you came along," she said, crossing her arms over her chest as though defending herself from him. "Annabelle and I worked hard for this — far too hard."

"And here I thought we were always going to share."

Juliet lifted her chin defiantly. "You cannot tell me that you were actually planning to share everything equally with us."

Xander didn't answer her accusation. He couldn't.

"Well, the real question is," he said instead, "what are we going to do from here?"

Xander was well aware that the only thing Juliet was concerned about was the fact that she had been caught.

Here he had thought that they had reached an understanding. He tried to ignore the fact that she was right and, in the end, he actually was going to take most of it for himself and his family, but

that was beside the point.

Now he needed to determine just what he was going to do, for if Arie found out that Juliet had absconded with most of the jewels, there would be hell to pay.

“I know the baron’s health isn’t well, but isn’t he going to notice when half of the pieces of jewellery he has loaned you have suddenly gone missing?”

Juliet shared a triumphant smile with Annabelle.

“That’s the beauty of our plan. No one will know — at least, not right away.”

“Why is that?”

“You’re looking at one of the most skilled jewellers in all of England.”

Xander studied at her with an eyebrow crooked and she sighed as though he was an idiot. While he wasn’t entirely following, she didn’t have to look at him quite like that.

“Not *I*,” she said with exasperation before motioning toward her friend. “Annabelle.”

“Your lady’s maid?” Damien chimed in, and Xander nearly laughed when Juliet rolled her eyes at him now.

“Annabelle is not actually a lady’s maid. She and I worked together at a jewellery shop when she discovered that I was a thief. As it turned out, she was willing to overlook the fact and we became friends. Then she was interested in helping me with this scheme.”

As the plan made itself clear, Xander had to admit that it was actually ingenious. Not that he was going to admit it to Juliet.

“So you have been making copies of the jewels and returning them while keeping the true pieces?”

“Basically,” Juliet said with a nod, and Xander crossed his arms over his chest as he admired her plan.

“My only question is, why you wouldn’t have told me of this?”

“I told you why I was here,” Juliet said in that defiant way of hers that had always drawn her to him. “I never told you what my plan was. Nor have you told me much of yours.”

Xander snorted at her words before turning to Damien. His brother knew him well enough to understand what he was thinking, and Damien slightly inclined his head to let him know that he was in agreement.

“How about this, Juliet?” he began. “Why don’t we all be

completely honest with one another? The only way I see this going forward is by working together.”

Juliet similarly looked toward Annabelle, who shrugged, obviously willing to trust whatever Juliet decided about the proposition.

“Very well,” she agreed. “Where do we go from here?”

# Chapter 9

Xander regarded Juliet for a moment, wondering whether or not he could trust her.

Finally he decided that he didn't have much choice.

"Very well," he said. "I have something to show you."

She tilted her head. "And I am interested. But first, Annabelle and I must hide the jewels."

"Damien can help her," Xander said, and he didn't miss the way Juliet narrowed her eyes at him for what he was sure she would call ordering her about. "We best go before anyone misses us."

"I hardly think—oof!"

Xander knew she wouldn't appreciate it in the least bit, but he was done with all of her protestations. He knew eventually she would decide to go with him anyway, for she wouldn't be able to help her curiosity. But he didn't have time for any more of her arguments.

He hauled her against his side, interlocking their elbows as though they were a couple leisurely strolling down the street, which they had been, many times and many years ago. This, however, was far from leisurely as he gripped her tightly against him.

"I can walk by myself," she said indignantly, trying to wrench her arm away, but when she slipped it out of his hold, he only grasped her fingers between his.

"What are you doing?" she asked, looking up at him with a glare.

"Leading you to what I promised to show you."

"I can follow you just fine."

"I know. What if I told you that I liked holding your hand?"

He grinned at her, teasing her, knowing that he was only annoying her, but she seemed to quickly understand the game he was playing and instead smiled up prettily at him.

"Very well," she said, squeezing his fingers so tightly that he nearly winced, although he managed to keep his expression blank. "Lead the way."

They actually didn't have far to go, which was rather



unfortunate, for he could admit to himself that he enjoyed having her hand in his. It reminded him of the past. A past in which the two of them had thought they would spend the rest of their lives together, when they had pledged their love to one another and vowed that nothing would ever pull them apart.

He closed his eyes, remembering the moment he had declared his love for her, the joy that had filled him when she had returned the sentiment. It had been one rare evening they had to themselves. He had insisted on cooking for her, and she had perched on the counter and watched him with amusement as he tried to remember everything Calli had taught him. He had been flustered, but thought he had hidden it well — until they both tried his meal and he had determined it fit for only a dog.

Xander had imagined they would fill the rest of their lives with such memories.

Until she had been injured. Because of him. And his vow changed to one that wanted to see her safe over anything else.

“Where did this come from?” Juliet asked, stopping abruptly and pulling him out of his reverie.

“*This* is what I wanted to show you.”

He opened the door of the small building, which looked like a gamekeeper’s cottage, although it had no business being here on the estate of a baron, especially when the surrounding land was used for agriculture and no hunting whatsoever.

“Is this one of those useless buildings that the aristocracy places on their land to try to achieve some sort of medieval fashionable style?”

Xander grinned at her description, but shook his head, even though she likely couldn’t see it in the dark. He kept a grip on her hand as he led her into the cottage, before finding this way to the fireplace by memory and sweeping his hand over the shelf until he found the tinder box.

He lit a flame in the hearth, just enough for them to see their way around the room.

“What is this place?” Juliet asked, beginning to inspect it for herself.

“From what I can tell, it’s a hideaway,” Xander said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Damien and I discovered it and thought it would be the perfect place for us to convene and keep all of the items we needed, but we soon discovered that someone else

obviously had the same idea. There were provisions, a valise packed for a quick escape, as well as money and identity papers.”

Juliet turned to him in consternation. “But who would be wanting to do such a thing?”

Xander shook his head. “Either someone else is trying to do the same thing we are, or the baron himself is up to no good.”

Juliet hummed to herself in the way she always did when she was thinking.

“I could see it. Lord Wilington does not seem to go about his business dealings in the most legitimate of ways. I think most of the jewels were likely bought unfairly as well.”

“They were.”

Juliet’s head snapped up at that. “How do you know?”

“I know because Arie knows the man who was cheated out of their fair value.”

A look of understanding flooded over Juliet’s face. “So that’s why you’re here.”

“Partially, yes. Arie promised that he would get the money back for him. The rest is ours to keep.”

“And how is Arie going to feel about you splitting that with me?” Juliet asked, advancing toward him. Xander swallowed hard at her nearness as well as the fact that she was closing in on the truth.

“Arie will understand.”

She snorted before chuckling as she turned away from him.

“Yes, because Arie has always been the understanding type.”

Xander ran a hand through his hair. “Sometimes I am disconcerted when I remember how well you know my family.”

Juliet looked down, and when she returned her gaze to him, he could read the sadness swimming in her eyes as she reminisced. “How are they? Especially Calli. I always liked Calli.”

He smiled as he remembered how close Juliet and his sister had become. How often had he actually been jealous of his sister for the amount of time that she and Juliet had spent together? He reckoned that Juliet knew Calli nearly as well as she did him. Nearly.

When he had left Juliet, Calli had been devastated, insisting that he go find her. She tried herself but found that Juliet was gone, vanished, someone else living in her rooms. Xander wasn’t sure if Calli had ever fully forgiven him for his decision.

“Calli is doing better than ever, actually. She is married now.”

“Married?” Juliet asked, her eyes widening. “To whom?”

Xander grinned, a true grin. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“You must,” she insisted.

“The Duke of Hargreave.”

“A *duke*? An actual duke?”

He laughed, truly laughed, pleased at her reaction. “Yes. It’s a long story, but she is incredibly happy.”

“You know what? Now that you say it, I heard something about that,” Juliet said, her expression turning thoughtful. “And how does this duke feel about your family?”

Xander shifted from one foot to the other as he leaned back against the bare wall behind him.

“Let’s just say that he and Arie reached an understanding. Calli will not have any more participation in our... business interests.”

“I see,” Juliet said, her expression contemplative. “She never seemed to enjoy the life much, anyway.”

“No, she didn’t,” Xander said, shaking his head. “I drew her into it.”

She looked into his face knowingly. “There is no reason to feel guilty for it. Calli always had a good life with your family.”

“She did, but...” he couldn’t look at Juliet anymore. “She nearly lost everything because of it.”

Juliet stepped toward him, concern on her face. “Well, it seems that all ended well for her.” She lifted a hand, pressing it against his cheek, and he couldn’t help but lean his head into it. “But what about you?”



\* \* \*

Juliet didn’t know what had possessed her to touch him. But he seemed so sad, so upset with himself, that she couldn’t help but try to provide him with some comfort. As much as she found it difficult to forget how he had hurt her, her memory was equally filled with all of the time they had spent together, and how much love had

been between them. It was hard to let that go.

“What about me?” Xander asked gruffly, turning his countenance toward her.

“What is going to make you happy? Another theft? Doing Arie’s bidding once again?”

“It’s the same thing you are doing, is it not?” he asked, and she knew he was only doing so to deflect her attention away from him.

“I am doing this to earn enough to be done with it all — for good,” she said. “Although now that you’re involved, I might have to rethink that. I hadn’t planned on splitting the spoils.”

“Sorry,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. “Nothing to be done about it, though.”

“No,” she said, smiling sadly. “I suppose not.”

“I will find a way to help you, though, Juliet, I promise. I don’t want you to have to continue this. Whatever you are doing — be it here or in the future...” he began rather gruffly. “You are careful, are you not?”

“Of course,” she said somewhat indignantly. “I can look after myself.”

“I know you can,” he returned, inclining his head. “I haven’t been able to decide whether you are better off with or without me around.”

Where was this coming from, now? Juliet had spent five years trying to convince herself that she was, in all actuality, better off alone, and now here he was, suggesting that he may think otherwise?

He must have read her expression, for he reached out an arm to draw her near. “Look, Juliet, I—”

“I’d better go,” she said, cutting him off, knowing that if she stayed, she might do something she would regret, in this gamekeeper’s cottage or hideaway or whatever it happened to be. At the moment, she didn’t entirely care. She didn’t care about the jewels or the baron or this plan she had concocted. All she cared about was her heart and about shielding it from the only man who had the power to completely break it again. Once was enough. If she let him in, if she kissed him again... all would be lost.

He was silent for a moment as he studied her, his jaw set tightly, but then he nodded and held out his arm. “I’ll walk you back.”

“I know the way.”

“Please, Juliet,” he said, his words soft, causing her to somewhat

relent. "I showed you this hideaway because I wanted you to know that there is something amiss here. Something dangerous. Not only that, but the tunnel in the house, the one that Damien and I have been searching? It extends out here, and it has been extended recently."

Her gaze flew up to meet his, and she began to understand that perhaps there was more to this than she had originally thought. She was tempted to tell herself that it was too much, that she wasn't equipped to handle this, but she steeled her shoulders and her resolve. She had been in worse situations before and had always found her way out of them.

"I can handle anything that comes my way," she said, but then tilted her head as she studied Xander. "But I do appreciate the concern."

He nodded as he led her out of the small cottage.

"I know that you were involved in some... petty crime before I came along."

Juliet smiled ruefully. She had been a pickpocket, and not a very good one. Her father had raised her, although that term could be applied about as loosely as possible, for he was usually out gambling away anything she stole until the day he was killed in an altercation outside of a gambling hell.

A month later was the day she had been caught with her hand in the pocket of the nobleman and Xander had saved her. She had been fifteen. His family had accepted her nearly as one of their own, and slowly she and Xander grew to be much more than just friends, albeit friends who knew far too much about one another.

Then everything had changed the night of the grand theft, when they had tried to scam the earl, who turned out to be far more cunning than they had realized. Juliet was beginning to wonder if that was the case with the baron as well.

They walked in silence through the moonlit night, the hedges and growth around them causing random shapes and shadows to nearly jump out at them. But both Juliet and Xander had seen more than their fair share of monsters before, and in comparison. these were nothing to be frightened of.

"Be careful around Shiplack," Xander said before leaving her at the front door of the estate. "There's something about him that strikes me as all wrong."

"I know," Juliet said as she opened the door. "I will. Now stop

worrying about me, understand?”

Once the door was open a crack, they both heard the summons.

“Juliet!”

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the doorjamb.

“Damn it.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s fine. His valet will be there as well.”

“I don’t trust him either,” Xander said darkly. “He’d do anything for his master and doesn’t leave his side. The man hardly speaks a word and when he does, it always seems to be with a fair bit of warning. I, however, have no such loyalties. Come. Let’s go.”

# Chapter 10

The baron had Juliet constantly waiting on him all of the next day as well, and Xander had just about enough of it. It was already difficult trying to access the jewels — what was left of them, anyway — but now he had to keep an eye on Juliet as well. The man had servants enough, why did he have to hold his power over Juliet?

Fortunately, Damien didn't have much comment on the subject, although Xander didn't miss the knowing glances he sent his way now and again.

The baron's continued presence in his bedroom also didn't make it easy for Xander nor Damien to access the room from either side of the secret door to try to gain entrance.

They were at a standstill, and Xander didn't like it. Not one bit.

He was also well aware that his eldest brother would not be pleased with the delay. Arie would be expecting them to return any day now with the haul of jewels, and if he didn't see them soon enough he would take things into his own hands, which was never a good situation for anyone involved. Xander was beginning to wonder if his missive for his tools had even reached Arie.

"We've got to do *something*," he said to Damien the next night after a dinner of serving the Shiplacks and Juliet, as the baron was still taking dinner in his room. The remaining three had retired to the drawing room, and Damien and Xander stood across the room, ready to serve if needed but out of earshot if they spoke quietly.

"But what?" Damien asked, as frustrated as Xander was. "Do we take the jewels that Juliet has already stolen away and split those, leaving the rest?"

Xander was already shaking his head. "She doesn't have the diamond necklace — the one that Arie wanted more than anything."

"I don't understand why he didn't send a woman," Damien said, crossing his arms. "Perhaps Diana would have been able to get into Wilington's good graces and have him give her the jewels, as he did for your Juliet."

Xander considered his brother with eyebrows raised. "We both know that Diana is many things, but charming and ladylike she is not. Besides, the only way she would be able to get close to the baron would be to get into his bed, and neither of us would have wanted that."

"Of course not," Damien agreed. "How did Juliet accomplish the feat?"

"That's a good question," Xander muttered, "And one that I intend to find the answer to."

"What is your plan here?" Damien asked, turning to him now. "When this is finished, do we take the jewels, give her what Arie doesn't want or know about, and leave? Will you say goodbye to her forever? You know she'll hate you if we're not fair to her, but at the same time, Arie would never forgive us if we don't come through."

Xander ran a hand through his hair with a sigh. "I don't know, Damien. I really don't. In fact, if you come up with an answer for me, I'd love to hear it."

"An answer which, unfortunately, I do not have," Damien said. "But I do have a question."

"Very well."

"After all of this is over, are you really going to be able to walk away and never see her again?"

Xander couldn't meet his brother's eye, but instead looked down at the floor as he tapped the heel of his boot against it.

"The thought is rather difficult to fathom," he finally muttered.

"As I guessed," Damien said smugly. Before Xander could answer him, however, they all started at the bellow from upstairs.

"Juliet!"

"My, but he is particularly loud for a man who is rather weak," Mrs. Shiplack said from the corner chair in the room, earning a reproachful frown from her husband and a smile from Juliet.

"I believe he is getting much better," Juliet said as she stood. "If you will excuse me for a moment."

Xander followed her up the stairs, trailing behind her in hopes that she wouldn't realize his presence. He listened at the door, hearing the baron tell her that he would be sleeping but would require food later on. When she emerged not long afterward, Xander hid at the end of the corridor. While he had no shame in checking on her, he also didn't want to meet with her ire.



He slipped back into the drawing room after her, when he was summoned to begin pouring Mr. Shiplack's after-dinner drinks.

"Tell me, young man — John is it?" Shiplack said, leaning back in his chair and looking up at Xander. The women were conversing in the corner of the vibrant jewel-toned drawing room and Shiplack was obviously desperate for conversation.

"Yes, Mr. Shiplack."

"How long have you been working for Lord Wilington?"

"Not long, sir. A couple of weeks, since the house party began."

"I see. So you don't know much about the goings-on around here?"

"No, sir."

Shiplack was supposed to be one of the baron's closest confidantes. So why was he pestering Xander for information?

"What's he like to work for?"

"He's fine, sir. Fair."

Which was not at all the truth, but what did Xander care? He was not actually working for Wilington.

"Well, you seem like a smart young man."

Xander didn't think Shiplack was much, if any, older than he was, but very well.

Shiplack continued, "if you ever have any reason to look for extra income, or perhaps work for someone else, come talk to me, all right?"

Well, that was interesting. Was Shiplack looking to hire someone for information on the baron? Or to achieve access into his chamber? An intriguing thought.

But why?

Xander spent most of the rest of the night waiting and watching for Juliet. When the baron summoned her late in the evening, well past the hours when most of the servants would be awake, Xander was instantly suspicious — and pleased that he had not gone to bed as Damien had suggested. He eased himself off the chesterfield in the parlor where he had hidden himself, then followed Juliet as she descended the stairs — alone thank goodness.

"Xander," she said, apparently sensing his presence in the shadows. "What are you doing?"

"Watching you. Ensuring you are well."

"I am perfectly fine," she said, spreading her hands out before her, and as she stepped into the light emitted by the windows, he

could see that she was dressed in a white nightgown which peeked out of the top of her pink wrapper, and his blood began to boil at the thought that the baron would have seen her like this, even if he hadn't touched her.

"Where are you going?"

"The kitchens."

"I'll join you," he said firmly.

"You don't need to."

"You shouldn't be walking about the house alone," he said, irrationally annoyed. "Especially dressed like that."

"One could argue that having you accompanying me is the worst impropriety of it all."

"I've seen you dressed like this before," he said, joining her in the servant's stairwell, walking beside her, allowing their hands to brush as they descended. "In fact, I have seen you in much less than that."

He could vividly remember the night she had, so shyly yet so boldly, stripped down in front of him, telling him that he was not allowed to touch her, but had to lie there watching instead. She had nearly driven him mad, yet it had been worth it in the end.

She said nothing for a moment, and Xander wished that he was facing her instead of standing beside her, for then he would lift his candle just to see that pink blush stain her cheeks.

"We shouldn't talk of such things," she said, although her voice wavered slightly. "That was a long time ago."

"So it was," he agreed. "But that doesn't mean the memories have faded. At least not for me."

"Why are you bringing this up?" she asked, desperation in her voice, and he knew then that she was just as affected as he was. That she remembered not only what had happened, but how it felt. She posed a good question, and one that he didn't know the answer to. For the truth was, she was right. He shouldn't be speaking of the past, and yet he couldn't keep himself from doing so. Being around her had brought the memories flooding back — memories that may have slowly started to fade, but that he would never be rid of now. For with her return to his life, they instead sharpened and took on bright edges of color. He hadn't been able to sleep at night as they had circled around his head.

"I know I shouldn't," he said as they reached the kitchens, and he took the candle from her and began to light the wall sconces.

“But I cannot help the way I feel about you, Juliet. How I did then, and about how I still do now.”

She ignored him for a moment as she began to explore the kitchens for any food that remained from dinner.

“Why would you say such a thing when you obviously didn’t care enough to stay when I needed you the most?”

She had her back to him as she began to cut small pieces of chicken and carrots left over from dinner.

“I told you why,” he said, throwing his hands in the air even though she couldn’t see him. “Because it was the best thing for you.”

She whirled around now, the knife looking somewhat sinister in her hands, although Xander was well aware that she would never hurt him. “Well, you were wrong,” she said, the anguish dripping off her words. “I was *not* better without you. I was alone. I had nothing. No one. And I missed you more than you could imagine.”

“Juliet,” he murmured, trying to soothe her even as his heart broke anew. He crossed over to her, taking the knife out of her hand and setting it down on the table as he lifted his hands to her face, stroking them down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I need you to know that I truly thought I was doing the right thing. You had been hurt, and it was all my fault. I never wanted that to happen to you again.”

“So what did you think I was going to do?” she asked, her expression defiant as she looked up at him with challenge in her eyes. “Start making myself an honest living? Settle down with a man who wouldn’t care about my past?”

He wrapped his hands around the top of her arms, hoping she would allow them to stay there. She seemed not to be concerned about it — although he wondered if she had even noticed.

“I thought I left you enough to keep you looked after for years to come.”

She leaned back, her eyes searching his, full of confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“When I left you, I gave Mary a package on my way out. It contained a note telling you where you could access all of my savings. I wanted you to have it.”

Juliet’s mouth opened in a round circle. “I never received that package.”

“You didn’t?” Xander’s shock was quickly replaced by ire, and

the knowledge that he never should have trusted the woman. “What would she have done with it?”

Juliet’s face darkened. “Probably the same thing she did with everything else I owned — stole it. While I was in bed, injured, she left in the middle of the night with everything of mine worth any value. I woke up to a bare set of rooms.”

Xander’s own mouth dropped open at that, his stomach rolling as he realized just what dire circumstances Juliet had been in. That *he* had left her in.

“What did you do?”

She smiled ruefully. “I couldn’t do much. Fortunately, one of my friends came to check on me and was able to take me to her place. I found myself a job at a jewellery store. That’s where I met Annabelle.”

“A jewellery store which you robbed?”

“I did,” she said, lifting her chin in defense. “Not much. Just enough to feed myself.”

She met his eyes before dropping her gaze again. “I’m not proud of what I have done, Xander. Of what I am doing. But there aren’t many options for a woman like me. Not unless I want to sell myself, and I just can’t bring myself to do that. Not yet, at least.”

Xander cupped her chin in his hand, lifting it to meet his eyes, as he needed her to understand the importance and sincerity of every word he was about to say.

“*Never* let it get that far, Juliet. *Never*. I have every hope that this will go according to plan and you will never have to worry again. But if circumstances ever become so dire, come to me and I will make it right.

“Xander—”

“Promise me, Juliet. That you would put aside your pride and do so. This is all my fault, anyway.”

“Not necessarily. I—”

“It is,” he said, regret filling him, causing his tongue to thicken with the taste of it. “I will never forgive myself.”

He dropped his hand, instead, cupping it around the back of her head as he pulled her in close, not to kiss her but to hold her tightly in an embrace. He closed his eyes as he rested his cheek on the top of her head, her hair tickling his nose as he breathed in the intoxicating scent of her that he thought he would never come close to again.

She had been everything to him, and he realized that she still was. He had no idea what the path forward was from here — whether he would make her life better or worse was a gamble. And yet, he knew that whatever happened, he would make sure that she lived the life she deserved.

# Chapter 11

Never had Juliet yearned for a kiss as badly as she did in this moment. In fact, she nearly tilted her head up and asked for one — and she knew that he wouldn't deny her.

But she was also well aware that if he kissed her, it would be for all of the wrong reasons. It would be because of the shame and regret he felt when he looked at her, and not because of anything he might feel for her in the here and now, despite what he told her.

She hadn't had any intentions of sharing with him the situation she had found herself in after he left her, but once he had shared the truth with her, she found the words came tumbling from her mouth without thought.

Now, standing here in his embrace, those familiar strong arms wrapped around her, she was nearly overcome by how good, how right it felt.

Until she remembered all the years that stood between them and she pushed back from him to resume her preparation.

"What's wrong?" he asked cautiously as she wiped away the tear that threatened to spill from the corner of her eye.

"Nothing."

"Juliet," he said, knowing her moods far better than that. "I don't know how else to apologize. I really don't. I promise you, I will right the wrongs. I will find this Mary whatever-her-name-is and I will get your money back."

"It's not that, Xander. That wasn't your fault, and I appreciate what you tried to do."

"So what is it?"

She looked up at him, meeting the earnest pleading on his face.

"In the five years since you left me, I heard much about you."

"Oh?"

"Of your family. Of how feared yet respected Arie had become. Of Calli, who was coveted by every man who ever laid eyes on her, though Arie would never allow anyone near. Of Damien, the strong yet sweet man who turned into a beast when someone he loved was threatened. Of Diana, who knew everything that happened in all of

London. But none of that was new to me. I knew all of that. What I was surprised to learn was about you.”

“You knew everything there was to know about me,” Xander said warily, and rightly so.

“Except about the libertine you had become. The man who could charm the clothing off every woman who entered his presence, I was told. Whose attention all women vied for. Who used his wiles to enter the bedrooms of women throughout London before making off with their jewels. At first, I denied that any of it could be true, but when you hear something often enough...”

She knew her chopping had become erratic, and when Xander laid a hand over her fingers, she didn’t resist him, for she knew if she wasn’t careful, she might lose one of them.

“I’m so sorry,” he said softly, and her eyes filled with tears when he didn’t immediately deny the words. She shouldn’t care. It had nothing to do with her. And yet, it hurt so badly it was as though the very knife in her fingers had been plunged into her heart.

“I’m sorry you had to hear all of that,” he continued. “Some of it is true. I did charm my way into bedrooms, use what I could to my advantage. Arie saw the opportunity and made use of it.”

“Of course he did,” she said bitterly, hating Xander’s brother more than ever.

“But the truth is... I have never slept with another woman since you. Just as I never did before you.”

She lifted her tear-stained eyes to his, already shaking her head.

“That cannot be true.”

“It is,” he said, shrugging one shoulder slightly, his expression difficult to read. “I cannot say that I was a perfect saint or never touched another woman since you, for there were some things that I had to do. But I never made love to anyone. I couldn’t.”

Juliet knew that he could be deceitful, that he was one of the best liars and charmers she had ever known. But here, with all bared between them, could he really claim such a bold statement without any truth to it?

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she stammered. “I’m not even sure what to think.”

“I understand,” Xander said, crossing to her, taking her cheeks between his palms as he leaned down and kissed one wet eye and then the other. “Take your time with it. But I needed you to know that.”

He stepped away from her, beginning to assemble the destroyed food onto a plate as best he could.

“We better take this up before the baron summons you once more.”

She nodded mutely as he efficiently cleaned the counter in front of them, then picked up the plate in one hand and the candle in the other.

“Shall we?”

She nodded, her throat constricted by the lump that had formed within it, her emotions too jumbled to make any sense of them.

Everything he had said to her — his words, his stories, his declarations — it all seemed too good to be true.

So what would she do if it was?



\* \* \*

Xander was shocked the next morning when the baron walked into the breakfast room.

So too, apparently was Juliet, for she straightened in her chair, her eyes widening.

“My lord,” she said, rising. “It is good to see you feeling better this morning.”

“I’ve been fine,” he said, his words harsh, and Xander grimaced at hearing him speak to Juliet in such a tone. “I just needed a bit of rest after the house party, is all.”

“Of course,” Juliet murmured as she sat back down, just the two of them at the table as the Shiplacks preferred to take their breakfast upstairs. Juliet had been studiously ignoring Xander’s gaze since she had entered, but with Damien present as well, there hadn’t been much to say, especially with other servants coming and going.

“Tonight we shall have a splendid dinner with the Shiplacks,” the baron announced, his eyes gleaming, causing Xander’s instincts to stand on edge. Wilington was up to something. But what?

“Do we have something to celebrate?” Juliet asked innocently,



and the baron simply smiled smugly.

“You shall learn more tonight,” he said. “Shiplack and I have had excellent financial dealings, and I am pleased that it is all coming into place. You, my dear, have been more a part of this than you realize.”

“Oh?” Juliet said, her eyebrows knitting in consternation.

“Yes. You have made an excellent showpiece and have raised a great deal of interest in what I have to offer.”

“I see,” Juliet said, although her face paled and when she lifted her eyes to Xander, they were filled with a slight sense of panic — panic he understood. For it likely meant that Lord Wilington was selling his jewels, except half of them were no longer jewels but rather reproductions of paste stone and pinchback. He only hoped Annabelle was as good at what she did as Juliet claimed, or else this might all be over before they even began. “Well, you know I am happy to help.”

Her smile was near to a grimace, but fortunately the baron didn’t seem to notice as he dove into his eggs and sausage with gusto.

Juliet seemed to have lost her appetite, which Xander understood.

He would have to remain close tonight during this dinner. And now that the baron was no longer abed, he and Damien had to begin working fast.



\* \* \*

Juliet stared into the wardrobe before her while Annabelle worked away behind her.

“Do you think he might allow you to wear the diamond necklace tonight?” Annabelle asked from the corner of the room, where she had set up a makeshift work table. “If we could get that, then we could leave with enough to make this all worth it.”

“Is it done?” Juliet asked, turning around, still unsure just what she should wear.

“Nearly,” Annabelle replied. “If I keep working while you are at dinner, I’m sure I could finish it.”

“Do what you can,” Juliet said. “Who knows what’s going on in the baron’s mind? One moment he can barely lift his head off the pillow, the next, he is back ordering everyone around. It’s perplexing.”

“You may get to wear the most beautiful jewels I have ever seen — and I have seen many,” Annabelle said with a wry grin as she looked up. “But at this moment I am most certainly glad not to be you.”

Juliet snorted as she reached in and picked out a dress, uncaring which one it was.

“And how are things with the erstwhile lover?”

“Do you mean Xander?”

“Is there anyone else?”

“No,” Juliet said, her smile slightly fading. “There will never be anyone else. You know that as well as I do.”

Annabelle put down the pinchback for a moment to really study Juliet. “Can you trust him? After everything you’ve been through with him?”

Juliet hugged the gown to herself as she stared at her friend.

“I don’t know what to think. When I’m with him, everything feels right. It’s as though I’m taken back five years ago. And then I remember everything that happened. When he explains to me why he did what he did — that he thought he was protecting me — it’s hard not to forgive him.”

She paused, rubbing the beautiful silk of the gown between her fingers before looking up at Annabelle.

“He said he left his entire savings for me. It would have been as much as we are hoping to earn from these jewels.”

“He what?” Annabelle’s blue eyes went wide.

“He says he left them with Mary. He didn’t tell her what was within the letter, but it explained where I should go to access them. He thought it would be enough for me to take care of myself.”

“But you never received it.”

“No.”

“So who’s lying — Xander or Mary?”

Juliet sighed as she began to remove her day dress. “I have seen Xander lie many a time, of course — but never to me. Whereas Mary... everything about that woman was deceitful. Besides, why

would he even raise the subject with me if there was no truth to it?"

"Hard to know why that family does anything they do."

"I suppose you are right."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Now, I'm going to go to dinner and try to actually eat something despite the fact that I continually lose my appetite whenever I'm with Lord Wilington and Mr. Shiplack."

There was a knock on the door, and Juliet called "Just a moment!" as she tried to allow Annabelle some time to hide everything she was working on. Once Annabelle had it tucked underneath one of the blankets, she crossed to the door and opened it a crack.

"Yes?" she asked before there was indecipherable murmuring from the other side. "Thank you."

She shut the door, turning around with a regretful grin as she held up a bracelet. "There is good news and bad news."

Juliet returned the wry smile. "At least they believe that the bracelet is still a real piece of jewellery."

"Yes, that's the good news. Do you think you can ask him for the necklace?"

"Perhaps tomorrow," Juliet said with a sigh. "As for tonight... he's in a strange mood. I shouldn't like to push things."

"Here," Annabelle said, "let me help you."

She crossed over to Juliet and, despite her protestations, began to help her finish dressing. Juliet felt as though she was tightening her battle armour.

And as it turned out, it wasn't that far from the truth.

# Chapter 12

Her greatest weapon was her smile, Juliet considered as she descended the stairs not long afterward. Her relationship with Lord Wilington was a strange one. He was apparently considering her as his wife, yet he never made any overtures besides his few sloppy attempts at pawing at her, as he had that day in the carriage.

She knew how fortunate she actually was, but she was beginning to worry that soon enough he would want more.

He never came to collect her from her room nor provided her any other reason to think that he might actually be interested in her. As far as she was aware, she was some showpiece for him — or a model for his pieces, if nothing else.

“Miss Simpson,” Mrs. Shiplack said with a warm though somewhat empty smile as Juliet approached. Juliet didn’t know whether she was reading too much into it, but she wondered if that was worry hiding behind her eyes. “You look lovely this evening.”

“As do you, Mrs. Shiplack,” Juliet returned, grateful that the woman was here and she wasn’t alone with the two other men. She wondered if Mrs. Shiplack felt the same.

“Miss Simpson,” Mr. Shiplack crossed over to her, standing next to his wife yet leaning toward Juliet and she had to resist from leaning back away from him. “Your bracelet... is captivating.”

“One of the prizes in my collection,” the baron said as he joined them, practically preening, as he seemed to completely ignore Juliet besides for what she wore. “The emeralds are dazzling, are they not?”

“They are,” Mr. Shiplack said, as he tilted his head in an attempt to better see them. Juliet swallowed hard. She had no idea how much Mr. Shiplack knew about jewels, but she had an uneasy feeling that she should not allow him too close.

“I have been most fortunate that the baron has so generously allowed me to wear a different piece every night,” Juliet said, twisting the bracelet around her wrist so as to try to prevent Mr. Shiplack from taking a good look at it. “Thank you, my lord.”

“Of course,” the baron said, looking up at her for the first time

since she had joined them. “They look well on you.”

With that, he waved Mr. Shiplack over to the sideboard for a drink, but not before Shiplack looked back at Juliet, running his eyes over her in a way that made her shiver.

She turned a forced smile to Mrs. Shiplack, who was wringing her hands together.

“I must apologize,” she said. “I know my husband is a most charming man, but I hope he doesn’t make you feel uncomfortable. He simply believes that you are a beautiful woman.”

“That is very... kind of him.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Shiplack said, nodding.

The awkward exchange was just a prelude of the remainder of the dinner. The baron was in an odd mood, but Juliet didn’t find out why until near the end, when he stood and lifted his glass in a toast.

“Tonight is cause for celebration,” he said, and Juliet swallowed hard. He wasn’t going to announce anything about their marriage — was he? “You know that I value my prized jewels. However, there are many that I find I no longer have need for. I am pleased to tell you all that, thanks to Mr. Shiplack, I have found a buyer for most of them.”

Juliet’s stomach flipped over as she wondered just what that would mean once this buyer inspected all of the jewels. If Lord Wilington were to discover the duplicity, would he possibly blame her?

“How lovely,” she said, swallowing her chagrin. “And when is this sale to take place?”

“In just a couple of days,” he said. “We shall make the sale, return to London to announce our engagement, and then we shall be going to the Continent shortly thereafter.”

Juliet felt the blood drain out of her face at the news.

“O-our engagement? To the Continent?”

She could practically sense Xander stiffen behind her, where he stood sentinel at the door as he waited to serve the table.

“Yes,” the baron said, waving a hand in the air. “It is why you are still here, aren’t you? Or are you just enjoying all of the baubles that have been decorating your neck and wrists? Or perhaps living in luxury suits you, hmm? If you don’t want to be married, we can find another arrangement. One that could start immediately.”

His eyes took on a hard glint as he stared at her, and it took

everything within Juliet not to tell him just exactly what she thought. She knew, however, deep within her, that she was using him as much as he was using her, so she really could blame him for nothing.

"I appreciate everything you have done for me, my lord, of course," she said demurely, lowering her eyes, just as she felt something brush against her knee under the table. She jumped only to find Mr. Shiplack grinning at her smugly.

Suddenly it all seemed too much to bear, and despite the surprised faces at her reaction, she pushed away from the table almost violently, muttering an excuse as she did. She needed a moment. Perhaps she wasn't cut out for this after all.

Juliet practically fled out of the room before actually breaking into a run until she pushed open the door of an empty parlor and sat down, her head within her hands as she took deep breaths. It wasn't long before the door opened behind her and she flew to her feet, her hand coming to her heart when she saw who it was.

"Xander," she said, and took a breath. "You scared me. I thought perhaps you were—"

"Shiplack?" he finished grimly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Yes, I can understand your fear. I know the baron has threatened action before, Juliet, but I think Shiplack is far more dangerous. I don't like the way he looks at you. And if he ever touched you..."

Juliet didn't think she should mention just what Shiplack had been trying to do under the table. She had a feeling it would cause Xander to fly in there and take off his head.

"Xander, we need to work much more quickly. I can't do this much longer, I honestly can't." She held up a hand as he began to open his mouth. "I know what you're going to say — that I should leave. But I can't do that either. I've worked far too hard on this. It's just taken too long now. The duplicity has been too much. I know I've tried to be like you, like your family, but this ... it's getting to me. I don't feel right about it, not anymore, as awful as Lord Wilington is. And I can only avoid Shiplack for so long."

"You're right," he said, his features hardening. "I would feel much better if you left. But if you're worried as to whether or not you can do this, then I will tell you this. I know you, Juliet, and I am well aware that you can do anything you put your mind to. I also agree that we must work quickly. I have no idea who the baron's buyer could be, but I'm worried—"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door, and they exchanged a glance.

“Don’t answer that,” Xander said, holding up a finger.

“I have to,” she said. “It is likely just Mrs. Shiplack or perhaps the housekeeper, ensuring my well-being.”

“True. Or it could also be—”

The door began to be pushed open, so it didn’t seem to matter anymore whether or not Juliet decided to allow whoever it was entrance. Juliet frantically waved Xander backward, for all would be lost if she was discovered alone in the parlor with one of the footmen. Xander stepped back into the shadows of the room, and despite her concern that they would be found and her knowledge that she could, in fact, take care of herself, she was still grateful that he was there with her — just in case.

Especially when Mr. Shiplack stepped in.

“Mr. Shiplack,” Juliet said, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart, knowing that there was no good way for this to end. “Please don’t mind me and my womanly hysterics. I shall return to the dining room in moments. I just needed a minute to compose myself.”

“Actually, Miss Simpson, I was happy to have the opportunity to catch you alone.”

“Oh?”

This couldn’t be good.

“Yes,” he said, advancing toward her, although Juliet wondered if the fact he had left the door open behind him was a good sign. She would have to hope so.

“It isn’t exactly proper, though, is it?”

Mr. Shiplack chuckled lowly. “Is anything about your arrangement here at Lord Wilington’s house appropriate, Miss Simpson? You are an unmarried woman, basically unchaperoned. You have no true connections besides a few distant relations you claim, people who are nowhere close to London to provide any validity for you. You are aware that you are known throughout the *ton* as the baron’s mistress?”

“I am nothing of the sort!” she said indignantly, her emotions true now as her hands formed fists at her side.

“I may know that and you may know that, but you can say whatever you want. That is the truth of it,” he said, stopping in front of her, far too close. “If you are looking for such a position,

Miss Simpson, I can assure you that I could provide a far better situation for you.”

“I am most certainly *not* looking for such a thing,” she said indignantly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I best be getting back—”

But he raised a hand and blocked her exit, to which Juliet could have sworn she heard a growl from the corner. Fortunately, Mr. Shiplack seemed otherwise distracted.

She ducked under his arm, but he was too fast for her. He whipped out a hand, catching her by the elbow, whirling her around, just as she caught a glimpse of the baron and Mrs. Shiplack in the hallway. Shiplack, however, apparently didn’t see and before she could say anything, he pressed himself up against her as he pushed her into the wall, while he lowered his head and pawed at her breasts.

Juliet managed to pull her hand back just in time, her fist connecting with his nose before his lips could descend upon her. A moment later, she saw stars as he reacted by slapping her across the face. Before she could properly recover or even determine what had just happened, however, Mr. Shiplack was ripped away from her, and she had only a moment to register Xander on top of him on the floor.

Suddenly there was a scream from the doorway, and she looked up to find the baron lying out cold in the corridor, Mrs. Shiplack standing overtop him, her cry at the entire scene resounding.

Moments later, the room was full of people, including Damien who pulled Xander up off of Mr. Shiplack, the valet and butler seeing to the baron, and Juliet found that despite the fact she couldn’t stop shaking, she had to first get Mrs. Shiplack quiet or else the chaos was only going to get worse.

She pulled the woman out of the room, taking her down the hall and back to the dining room, where she settled her into a chair. Once the housekeeper joined them and Juliet ensured Mrs. Shiplack was in capable hands, Juliet stumbled into the hallway, stunned for a moment by the rapid sequence of events, the sting on her face, and the understanding of how much worse it all could have been.

Until he was there. Xander wrapped an arm around her, supporting her, and, despite the blood on his knuckles, he helped her down the corridor and up the stairs, leaving the chaos behind them.



# Chapter 13

Xander could feel the blood pounding through his veins as he replayed the scene in his head. Of Shiplack, pressing his body on Juliet. Of Juliet, struggling before him. Of the man's hand reaching out and striking her across the face. All rational thought, all reason had left him, as he had wrenched the man off her and tried to beat him bloody senseless.

If Damien hadn't pulled him off, he wasn't sure how far he would have gone.

He closed his eyes and took a breath as he felt the vibrancy of the woman beside him, wrapped in his arm.

He had to maintain control. For Juliet.

In the chaos, once a fair bit of reason and focus had begun to drip back into his mind, he had looked for her, panicking when he couldn't find her. But as Damien began to see to everyone else in the room, Xander was able to properly search for her, finding her his only goal.

Now he never wanted to let her go.

Annabelle passed them on the stairwell, her eyes wide with concern, but Juliet assured her that all was fine and that Xander would look after her. Annabelle nodded, her expression saying that she understood far more than Juliet might be saying, but she continued down the stairs, likely to help with all the commotion remaining below.

Finally they were in Juliet's room, blessedly alone.

"Are you all right?" Xander asked, turning and gently wrapping his hands around the top of her arms as he looked her over.

"Of course," she said, as strong as ever, although he couldn't miss the slight trembling throughout her body. "I told you that I could take care of myself, did I not?"

"I do think you likely broke his nose," Xander acknowledged. He had heard the crack right before he had taken the man down himself.

He lifted Juliet's hand within his own bloody fists, seeing the bruised knuckles.

"We best get some cold water on this," he said, well versed in healing such bruises. "The same with your face."

She laughed, and he could feel some of the tension begin to ease out of her, for which he was grateful.

"I think you're worse off."

"I'm fine," he said, although he did listen to her and walk over to the washbasin, pouring water over his hands if only to wash away the blood so that he wouldn't touch her with it.

He poured water over a piece of linen before walking over to Juliet, holding it against her face before lifting her hand and gently pressing the cloth against her knuckles. Somehow the gesture seemed far more intimate than anything else that had occurred between them since they had met again.

"Better?" he asked softly, and she nodded.

"Better."

He led her over to the bed, sitting her down upon it.

"Tomorrow, Damien and I will try to get into the safe and get the jewels," he said. "If that doesn't work, then we will leave — we will *all* leave. This is getting ridiculous."

"But what will Arie say if you don't bring home what he is waiting for?"

Xander shrugged. "I don't care anymore. It's more important to keep us out of danger. Shiplack's involvement and his attempt against you has crossed the line. Besides, I've likely now lost my job, and who knows what Wilington is going to say to you — if he is still breathing, that is."

Juliet bit her lip. "Oh, dear. I didn't even check on him. I'm a horrible person."

"I would argue that *he* is," Xander returned with a raised eyebrow. "But if it makes you feel better, he was already sitting up when I left to find you. I'd wager his heart couldn't take all that was happening before him."

"Oh, I'm glad he was able to rouse himself," Juliet said on a long exhale. "I'm happy to hear that, at least."

"You're far too good a person, Juliet," Xander said, unable to help himself from reaching out and running a hand down the soft skin of her face.

"I'm not at all," she protested. "No, I don't want the man to die, but I am to blame for all the turmoil that is leading to the issues of his heart. He is supposed to be avoiding such situations, and I am

causing them!”

“Shiplack caused this.”

“I suppose.”

Xander tucked a strand of honey brown hair behind her ear as he studied her face, those wide eyes, filled with a mixture of love, sorrow, regret, staring up at him.

“I’ve missed you,” he murmured. “So much.”

She shuttered her gaze from him.

“I’ve missed you too. More than you know. I’m just worried, Xander.”

“About what?”

“About you. Me. What will happen if I allow myself to fall in love with you again.”

He had to force himself to breathe, her words nearly wrenching all of the air in the room away from him. “I know I don’t deserve you.”

“You’re a good man, Xander. And I understand now that all you have done was from a good place. But that doesn’t mean you won’t make that decision once more, even with the best of intentions. And I cannot handle that decision again.”

He cupped her face in his hands. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I was happy,” she said, looking up at him, her eyes searching his, “when I was with you.”

He groaned as her words undid him, and he leaned in, tilting her chin up toward him as he dipped his head and took her lips.

Xander waited for her to push him away, to tell him that she couldn’t do this, that it was too much and she needed to put space between them.

But instead, she leaned into him, placing her hands on his chest as though drawing strength from him as she took his lips with as much passionate abandon as he did hers.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her both tenderly and with the knowledge that he never wanted to let her go again.

As Xander teased her lips open with his tongue, searching, tasting, he was flooded with both relief and incredulity that he would ever have the opportunity to be with Juliet again. He had thought, when he had looked back at her that last time, that he would never see her again, let alone be as close to her as this.

When her fingers began to slip the buttons of his shirt from the holes, he stepped back. Before they went any further than this, he

had to be sure that this was what she wanted, that she wouldn't regret whatever was to come between them.

"Juliet," he said, hearing the raggedness of his own breath, matching hers in equal measure, "are you sure you want to continue? And your face. I should go get something for your face."

He reached up, dabbing his fingers tenderly around the mark, having to fight the rage that began within him anew when he saw the purple swelling already forming around it.

"No." She shook her head, and his heart fell that she wanted him to leave her, even as he knew he was the one who had asked. She must have read his expression, for she quickly continued. "I mean yes, I do want to take this further. But no, do not leave to go get something for my face. Do *not* leave me again."

He had a feeling that she wasn't only speaking about this moment in time, but about forever. He couldn't make her that promise, not now. But there was one vow he would make to her.

"I promise you, Juliet, that I will make sure that you are never hurt again. Do you understand me?"

She nodded, looking into his eyes as she slipped her hands over his shoulders and drew him closer again.

"I understand. And while I am the only one who can properly protect my own heart... I am ever so grateful to you as well. Now, don't worry about my face. My face is just fine."

With that, she stepped up, lifting her lips to his, becoming the aggressor this time as she kissed him harder than he had taken her, and her intent was clear — she wanted him and she was not taking no for an answer.

This time, she was purposeful in her actions as she undid the remainder of his jacket buttons, and he had never been so pleased to be free of the dreadful garment. He threw it to the floor and then shucked his shirt, ripped the buttons on the back of Juliet's dress, before he much more gently nudged it over her shoulders as she shimmied out of it.

His breath caught at the sight of the creamy expanse of her skin, and as he touched his lips to hers again, he lifted her up and backed her toward the bed, placing her down upon it before inching himself over top of her, framing her between his elbows as he feasted on her mouth.

It had been far, far too long, and he had imagined this moment over and again in his dreams, both while awake and asleep. He was

not going to rush this.

As he kissed her, he ran his hand down the delicate bones of her shoulders and collarbones, skimming his fingers over the top of her chemise before he trickled them down lower, cupping her breast in his palm, stroking his thumb over her nipple as she arched her chest up into him, asking for more.

He grinned as, instead, he trailed his hand down to her stomach, laughing when she swatted at him.

“You’re still the worst tease,” she practically growled, and he leaned down and nipped her bottom lip.

“But you love it.”

“I do not!”

“You do.”

As though to prove his point, he lowered his hand, running it down over her hip bone, cupping, pulling her toward him, but not allowing her to brush against him or move any farther.

She pulled back from him, narrowing her eyes.

“Two can play that game,” she threatened, and from the dangerous glint in her eyes, Xander knew he was in trouble.

She reached down and brushed her hand over the fall of his breeches, but made no move to undo them or to search within. She just grinned as her featherlight touch brushed over him, causing him to ache deliciously for her.

“You’ve made your point,” he muttered, causing her to laugh, a sound that he enjoyed more than nearly any other in the world.

He fitted his hands around her to unlace her stays before sliding the chemise down over her shoulders, her waist, her hips, until it was in his hands and then joined the collection of clothing on the floor beside them.

Xander knelt there above her, taking his fill of her, hardly able to believe that this woman was his again — for the night at least. She had been through a rather trying experience this evening, it was true, but she was no simpering miss. She had, much to his regret, been through much more harrowing experiences in her life. His eyes went of their own accord to her thigh, where the jagged pink scar remained, a reminder of the last time they had been together.

“Don’t,” she said, the words stern and yet sympathetic as well. “It wasn’t your fault. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that, but it’s the truth. I was as much a part of the planning and

execution of that robbery as you were. I made my decisions as you made yours and I will not have you spending the rest of your life blaming yourself for it.”

“I know, but—”

“No buts,” she said firmly, lifting a finger in the air. “Promise me you will not apologize for it again.”

“I—”

“*Promise* me.”

He sighed. She could ask him absolutely anything in this moment and he would have been far too weak to deny her.

“I promise.”

“Good. Because I am fully healed and completely fine. Now.” She crooked a finger at him. “Come here.”

He did as she instructed, inching toward her until he was close enough for her to begin undoing the fall of his breeches. He tilted his head back, closing his eyes at how wonderfully amazing it felt to have her fingers on him, those deft fingers that could pick a lock nearly as well as he could, and slip buttons through their holes.

It occurred to him that he had never asked her if *she* had remained true to *him*, but then he decided that it didn’t matter. If she hadn’t, it was only because he had left her. She could have been his for life but *he* had chosen otherwise.

When she finished, he pushed his breeches down over his thighs and calves until he sprang free, jutting out toward her.

“Oh, Xander,” she said with a sigh before lifting her eyes to his. “How I’ve missed you.”

He grinned wolfishly at that before leaning down overtop of her, taking her lips and cupping her breasts within his hands, as he couldn’t seem to get enough, nor feel enough of her. His hands were everywhere, and as much as he wanted to prolong the experience, he was equally aware that he could not take too terribly long, for his body was beginning to have other ideas.

He slid one hand down her body to cup her, his thumb rubbing at her nub as he slid a finger inside of her, finding her wet and ready for him. She threw her head back with a moan, gripping his biceps as she called out “yes, now!” and he wondered if the whole house might have heard.

Not that it mattered as he slid inside her, knowing as he did so that he was coming home — where he belonged.

When he was fully seated within her, they clung to one another,

both so overcome that they needed a moment to adjust to the fact that this was real, this was happening, before he began to move. Or rather, *they* began to move. They had always been so in sync with one another that it was no surprise that they were in unison now as well, as Xander glided in and out of Juliet in the same time that she raised and lowered her hips to him.

He kissed her once, twice, before leaning up on his elbows and staring at her, their eyes meeting in memory of everything that had been between them and everything that was available to them in the future.

If they chose to take it.

Locked together like that, body, mind, and soul, as Juliet began to pulse around him, Xander let out a shout as he lost all control, pumping until he was depleted, everything within him now lost in her.

He was filled with her strength, yet also completely overcome in weakness as he could do nothing more than lie down beside her. He pulled her close to him, wrapping an arm around her as he lifted the fingers of his other hand and began to stroke her hair.

"I thought I would never again experience that," she murmured so softly that Xander had to lift himself up on his elbow to better hear her.

"Never?"

"It's like you said," she said with a shrug, looking over her shoulder back toward him. "There could never be another. Only you."

In response, he tightened his arm around her, holding her as close as he could be.

He didn't think he could ever let go again.

# Chapter 14

When the sun hit her face the following morning, Juliet kept her eyes closed for another moment longer. Something deep within felt changed. Different. In a freeing yet altogether concerning kind of way. But what was it?

Her lips curled into a smile as she remembered. Ah yes. Xander.

Of course, there had also been the encounter in the parlor with Shiplack, one that might have far-reaching consequences for both her and Xander. But she far preferred to remember everything that had come afterward instead.

She turned over, reaching out an arm in search of him, but instead she found an empty space in the bed. She sighed. She knew he had responsibilities to attend to and likely much to account for after last night — as did she. And yet, she still would have enjoyed waking up beside him.

She sat up, raising her arms overhead as she wondered whether it would ever happen again — whether there was the chance for them to find their way back to one another, or if this had been a momentary response to all of the emotions that had tumbled out from their evening. From everything Xander had led her to believe, he still felt for her as she did him. Had he, then, overcome his ridiculous reservations that a life without him was safer, better for her than one with him in it? She had no idea, but she had to be sure not to give her heart away until she knew.

Unless it was already too late.

When the door began to open, Juliet looked up hopefully until Annabelle walked through with a laugh when she caught Juliet's expression.

"Expecting someone else?"

Juliet flushed hotly as she looked to see if her clothing was still piled on the floor, surprised to find that, instead, it was hanging over the chair in front of the vanity. Xander was still taking care of her, it seemed.

"I'm sorry, Annabelle," she began, but her friend just chuckled and waved it off. "You are obviously forgiven — as long as you



share everything that happened.”

“Ah—”

“Very well. Not everything. As much as you would like. I’ve already heard a version of the altercation from the servants belowstairs, but the truth would be much preferred, if you please.”

Juliet nodded as she began the story, including everything that had happened at dinner, with Shiplack, and then a much less detailed version of what it had led to with Xander following it all.

Annabelle rubbed her forehead.

“We need to get out of here.”

“You sound like Xander.”

“But it’s true. If this buyer comes... I know my pieces are good, Juliet, but they’re not *that* good. No paste or pinchback is going to fool a man who works with fine pieces each and every day, who would most assuredly be well aware that mine are a forgery.”

“The real jewels are still hidden in the wood beyond the estate?”

“They are. You are not suggesting that you want to return them?” Annabelle asked incredulously. “We would be far better leaving with what we already have.”

“But is it worth it if we don’t have the necklace?”

Annabelle sighed, shrugging her shoulders. “It’s better than nothing. Perhaps not enough to start new lives for ourselves, but it would make all of this somewhat worth it.”

“Well, I suppose the first thing to do is go to breakfast and see if I am still welcomed in this house. Have you heard anything regarding the baron’s health?”

“From what I hear he is fine, resting in his rooms.”

“Are the Shiplacks still here?”

“For now, although I don’t think Mr. Shiplack will be in any condition to join you for meals for a day or two, at least, if what I am told is true.”

“Oh, dear. Has the baron said anything about me?”

“He’s been asking for you to come see him. I told his valet to inform him that you were still sleeping.”

“Very well.” Juliet took a breath, squaring her shoulders. “I best go face whatever awaits me.”

So sure she was that she would be asked to leave the baron’s estate and never return, she was shocked to find that when she reached the breakfast room, everything was as normal as could be, unless one counted the absence of anyone else save a maid and

Damien.

"Where is everyone?" she asked him in a low voice, searching the room as though people were going to come out of hiding from beneath the chairs.

"Well," he said in an equally quiet voice. "If you are referring to Xander, he is currently speaking to Wilington as he was asked upstairs. Mrs. Shiplack has returned home, while *Mr.* Shiplack is still on the grounds recovering."

"I see," Juliet said, picking up a plate to fill it, finding that her fingers were trembling ever so slightly. She quickly returned the plate before Damien noticed. "Have you heard any directives from the baron on what I am to do?"

"Just that he requires your presence after you have eaten, is all," Damien said as he obviously had noticed her troubles for he lifted a plate for her and filled it, despite the squeak of protest from the maid who entered and caught him at it. Damien waved her away, and off she went, although not before he winked at her, causing her to blush.

"Do you think he is going to send me away?"

"From what I can tell, he doesn't have much recollection of last night," Damien said, before looking up at her. "The question is, what would you like to do?"



\* \* \*

"My lord," Xander greeted Wilington as he stepped into the room, already adjusting his collar. He was well aware that this would likely account for his last few minutes in the home, before the baron told him to leave and never return. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Just fine," Raymond grumbled, pushing himself into a sitting position as Xander noticed that the valet, for once, was nowhere to be seen. "I don't know why everyone is so concerned."

Perhaps because the man kept fainting, particularly during chaotic events.

“The physician did say to rest, my lord,” Xander couldn’t help but remind him, to which the baron grunted.

“It has nothing to do with my heart,” he returned. “I think there is something else.”

“Oh?”

“I believe someone is trying to kill me.”

Xander raised his eyebrows, taken aback. There were multiple people attempting to steal from the man, yes, but to kill him? That was another issue entirely. Was the baron overly perceptive or just overly anxious?

“What makes you believe that, my lord?”

“There is no other explanation for what continues to ail me. I am sure I am being poisoned.”

“I should hope not my lord, but if there is any truth to that, then I will do everything I can to help ensure that whoever is behind such a thing does not succeed.”

“That is exactly why you are here. John, I need you to be on the lookout. Have you discovered anything as to who is stealing from me?”

Xander hesitated. “No, my lord. Unless you know of anything missing, it doesn’t seem that there is anything to account for, and I have not noticed any behavior that would be suspicious.”

Or that he wanted to tell the baron about.

“Hurrmph,” the baron said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Well, can’t be Shiplack. The man is already making money off me. Can’t be Juliet. She doesn’t have enough of a brain to even know where to start.”

Xander rocked back and forth from his heels to his toes, willing himself not to respond. For Juliet was anything but empty-minded, although the fact that the baron assumed such a thing currently worked in her favor — which made her smarter than any of them had given her credit for.

“Must be one of the staff,” the baron decided for himself as he thought aloud. “Which means that you are in the best position to determine who it would be. I have asked my valet to try to find out as well, but he’s not much associated with the other servants. A footman is in a far better position and you have not been here long enough to have made friends or enemies.”

“That is a fair assessment, my lord.”

“Yes,” the baron said before turning hard eyes on Xander. “And

if you find out who it is, you make sure they understand just why one should never cross me, do you hear me?"

Then when he steeled Xander with that look, the knowing in his gaze told Xander that as much as Wilington might be pretending he didn't remember everything that had occurred last night, he was as knowledgeable as the rest of them.

So why was he pretending to be senile? It was, perhaps, more concerning than anything else that was occurring in this place.



\* \* \*

Nearly half an hour after she began, Juliet was still staring at her still rather full breakfast plate when she heard a low murmuring behind her. She whirled around to find Xander standing in the doorway, he and Damien conversing in voices so low she couldn't hear any of what they said.

Finally, Damien nodded and stepped out of the room, while Xander took his place, leaving him alone with Juliet.

"He's just in the hall outside the door," Xander said. "If anyone is going to enter, he will let us know."

"I'm not sure if it's possible for my reputation to be ruined any further," Juliet said ruefully, turning her seat slightly so that she could face Xander.

He crossed the room and pulled up a chair next to her, straddling the back of it, his face close to hers as those violet eyes wandered over her in nearly a caress.

"How are you?" he asked softly, and her heart nearly melted for him once more.

"Fine, considering," she said, taking a breath, not wanting him to see just how rattled she was at her entire circumstance. She needed to know what was to become of her, and then she would feel much more at ease, knowing whether this was all mostly for naught, or if she could actually still see her way through this.

As for what was to become of her and Xander... he was the one bright light in all of this darkness, and she feared having any of her

illusions dashed. She also had to be brave enough to accept whatever was to come, however, and to tell him what she wanted... what she needed.

"After everything that... happened last night?" he asked, lifting a finger to lightly trace the ugly purple bruise on the side of her cheek, one that Juliet had tried and failed to cover with her hairstyle. She knew despite his soft touch, however, that he was not entirely referring to what had happened with Shiplack, but also between the two of them.

"I have no regrets, if that's what you are asking," she said, knowing him better than he likely did himself. "In fact, I would do it again, if I had the chance."

Despite the nerves fluttering around her stomach, she looked up at him meaningfully to see if he understood just exactly what she was saying. His own cheeks went rather red as he grinned.

"I would agree with that sentiment," he said audaciously.

"Xander," she said before taking a breath. She didn't want to ask the question, and knew now was most likely not the time considering all that was happening around them, but still, she couldn't ignore it. "When whatever is to happen here is finished, what is to come next? For us?"

He tapped his fingers against the back of the chair, a sign that he wasn't entirely sure what to say.

"I wish I could tell you that all will be well and we will live happily together for the rest of our days," he said. "I will add that I never want to be far from you again, that I would like to always be able to ensure that you are well and happy, and never again have to consider stealing to support yourself."

"But..." she continued for him, even while her own stomach was flipping around most dreadfully.

"But I can't promise you a life without crime if you were to stay with me. I must be loyal to my family, and being a part of my family means partaking in all of their schemes, as you already well know. It was not the life for Calli, and she left it. But I don't know if I ever could."

"What if I didn't want to either?"

"What are you saying?" he asked, his violet eyes boring into her most disconcertingly.

"I'm saying that while yes, I do have plans to leave this life if I can, I have decided that I would rather an unpredictable, risky life

with you, than one without you. That I am willing to take that chance — if you are.”

His eyes widened as he leaned closer to her, taking her fingers within his, intertwining them.

“Juliet, I—”

The door pushed open before he could finish, and as much as Juliet liked Damien, she cursed his timing.

“Someone’s coming,” he said hurriedly, slipping inside. “I think it’s Shiplack. You might want to leave, Juliet.”

“No,” she said, holding her head high as Xander returned his chair and stepped back to the side of the room. “If he has something to say to me, he can say it to my face in the light of day.”

She was far too angry at what the man had attempted with her to hide as though she had anything to be ashamed about. She had done nothing wrong — well, not to Shiplack, anyway — and she was not going to pretend like she had.

When the door opened, she ignored it, instead spearing a piece of sausage with a fork and shoving it into her mouth, despite the fact she was still not hungry in the least and even chewing it with Shiplack in the room made her want to be sick.

“Well, well,” Shiplack said as he entered the room, crossing over to the display of food at the side of the room — most of which would go uneaten. “Miss Simpson, how lovely to see you this morning.”

Juliet took a sip of her tea, no longer nervous as her ire set in just at the man’s voice. How dare he believe that after all he did and attempted last night that he could show his face in this breakfast room without any shame.

She stood, turning to face him. “I find I have now completely lost my appetite,” she said, happy to see that his nose was a glorious shade of purple, angling slightly to the left, while he seemed to be favoring his left side. Good. She and Xander had left their mark. “If you will excuse me.”

“Actually, I would enjoy the company, Miss Simpson,” he said, waving a hand back toward her seat. “I believe we should clear up the misunderstanding that occurred last night.”

“Misunderstanding?” Juliet said, raising a brow. She longed to tell him exactly what she thought, that he was one of the most horrible men she had ever met — and she had met quite a few unsavory characters — but rational thought invaded and she

realized that this was likely the only way forward for her, to make partial amends with the man. “I accept your apology, Mr. Shiplack, and I offer my own as well. Now, the baron has requested to see me and given his current health concerns, I feel it is most pressing that I go quickly. Good day to you, sir.”

With a swirl of skirts and giving no opportunity for him to respond, she was out the door, head held high, as Xander whispered, “Brava, my love,” as she passed.

It was enough to make up for everything else.

# Chapter 15

When Juliet knocked on the door of the baron's room, she was expecting to find the man lying prone on his bed, as ill as he had been the last time he'd had such an attack.

Which was why she was shocked when he opened the door himself.

"Miss Simpson," he said abruptly, stepping forward so that she had to move out of his way. "You came. You took much longer than I anticipated."

"Of course, my lord," she said demurely, ignoring his last sentence. "How are you feeling?"

"Never better," he said, shutting the door behind him as he began walking down the corridor, apparently expecting her to follow in his wake. "What happened to your face?"

"I..." She realized it was likely best that she not provide the truth if he truly didn't remember. "I walked into my wardrobe. Quite clumsy of me."

"Quite," he agreed. "I'm not sure how you are supposed to show off my prize jewels with your face looking like that. You'll only scare my buyer away."

"Your buyer? Is he arriving today?"

"Yes, you silly chit, I told you that."

"I'm sorry, my lord, I wasn't sure when he was scheduled."

"Today. You obviously forgot."

Juliet wasn't entirely sure whether or not his memory was actually failing or whether he used the ploy as was convenient, but she wasn't about to question it.

"That is good news," she said as the panic set in. The buyer's appearance was far too soon. "When is he to arrive?"

"Today. How many times must I repeat myself before you understand?" Lord Wilington snapped, and Juliet took a breath. Patience.

"I only meant what time."

"Noon. But you will meet him at dinner."

"Oh... lovely."



“You will wear your finest gown. You will wear the diamond necklace and bracelet.” Frowning, he added, “And do something about your face.”

She nodded slowly. “I will try, my lord.”

“Don’t just try,” he said as he reached his study, stepping through the door and quite obviously dismissing her. “You have all day to fix it. Do so.”

With that, he slammed the door behind him, leaving Juliet silently fuming on the other side. This was not going well. Not at all.



\* \* \*

“We have to act now,” Damien said, to which Xander agreed. The butler had just apprised the staff that there would be another guest joining the baron that evening for dinner, and it wasn’t difficult to guess who it might be. “There is no time for your fancy lock-picking as your tools have not yet arrived from London. We are going to have to force our way in. I don’t see any other choice.”

“Fine. I’ll find Juliet and see if she can distract the baron.”

“He’s in his study,” Damien said. “His valet will be having his luncheon soon. We do it now.”

Xander practically growled his agreement, but agreed as they quickly changed before making their way out of the estate to the nondescript cottage that stood not far from the house. It was the easiest way to enter the passageway, and would allow them to determine whether their faceless foe was making any progress.

They were about to enter when Damien held his finger to his lips, nodding toward the building.

Xander stepped quietly toward it, placing his ear against the wooden door, hearing the murmur of voices within. He and Damien exchanged a glance, aware that there was no opportunity now for them to enter — but who was in there and what were they to do?

Xander nodded his head toward the window, and the two of them slunk down low enough so that they couldn’t be seen from

within. When they finally made it to the window, Xander slowly rose from his crouched position until he was eye level with the bottom of the window. He wasn't surprised to see Shiplack, but he was shocked to see his wife along with him. They seemed to be arguing, with Mrs. Shiplack much more animated than Xander had ever seen her before.

He crouched back down. "I thought Mrs. Shiplack left," he hissed toward Damien.

"She did," Damien returned. "I saw her into a carriage myself."

"Well, she didn't go far, for she is there, in the cottage."

Damien's eyes nearly bulged out of his head. "Well of all the—"

"Well, well, boys, sneaking around peeking in windows, are we?"

Xander and Damien froze as they stared at one another in shock before turning to the newcomer. It couldn't be him.

But no one else sounded like that. The better question was, just what was he doing here?



\* \* \*

Juliet paced her chamber back and forth, while Annabelle patiently listened to her rant as she put the finishing touches on the diamond necklace. Juliet was to appear for dinner shortly, but was finding her nerves were frayed.

"I looked everywhere, but it seems Xander has disappeared. We will have to follow through with our plan without him and Damien."

"I thought that's what we were doing anyway," Annabelle said, lifting the piece of jewellery and admiring her work. "My, this is beautiful. I can hardly wait to have the real thing in my hands again."

"We were going to. But then we made a deal with them. Only now, I cannot find him anywhere, so I'm not sure which plan we should follow. I forgot how frustrating it is to work with men."

Annabelle snorted. "That is the truth. Now come, try this on.

Tell me what you think.”

Juliet couldn't help but agree, knowing how hard Annabelle had worked on the necklace, and she crossed over to the mirror as Annabelle stood behind her and slid it around her neck. As she considered that they had done a decent job in covering her bruise, Juliet placed her fingers on the necklace's center stone, which, if she didn't know better that it was paste, she would have sworn was a diamond.

“You have outdone yourself,” she praised her friend, who beamed knowingly.

“Thank you,” Annabelle said. “As have you. You have brought us this far, and now we have one more night before we can take our grand prize and be away from here, never looking back. How does that sound?”

If Annabelle had asked her such a thing two weeks ago, she would have said it sounded perfect. But that was before. Before Xander had returned to her life and had changed everything — most importantly, her expectations on how she wanted the rest of her life to look.

“It sounds wonderful,” she said with a forced smile for Annabelle, understanding how much it would mean to hear her say it. They had started this together and would finish it together — with or without Xander and Damien. As much as it hurt to think so. “What is the plan, then? I shall have to wear the real necklace to dinner if this dealer is going to be there, as chances are he will immediately know the difference.”

“And then after dinner, you will have to make an excuse at some point, when we will switch it out.”

“As long as the dealer doesn't take it with him,” Juliet said grimly.

“Then I suppose we'll have to run,” Annabelle said, as composed as ever. “I'll have everything ready.”

“And then we must disappear,” Juliet said with a nod and a heavy heart. Disappear, never to see Xander again. “Very well.”

Annabelle eyed her knowingly. “Best you try to find that thief of yours and talk to him first, or you'll spend the rest of your days mooning after his memory.”

“I do not *moon*,” Juliet said indignantly.

Annabelle snorted. “I saw you moon for months on end. See what he wants for the future, Juliet. You'll be happier for it if you

do.”

“Very well,” she said. “But first, I have to find him.”



\* \* \*

Juliet had accepted the true necklace from Annabelle after its delivery from the valet, and she couldn't stop herself from continuing to glide her fingers along the jewels. She might have sold everything she had ever stolen, but she couldn't help her love for such beautiful pieces. It was foolish, she knew, and quite vain, especially for a woman who had grown up with practically nothing, but she couldn't help her admiration for them.

But she had much more important things to worry about.

Tonight, the necklace was like a coat of armor slung around her shoulders, as her hand glided along the banister while she descended the staircase. As usual, no one was there to meet her, one of the other footmen, a man she hardly recognized, pointing her toward the drawing room, where apparently the baron and his guest awaited. She heard murmurs beyond the door as she neared, and she took a breath, steeling herself before pushing open the door.

Then freezing in shock.

Juliet was not one to often lose herself in the moment, but she could hardly believe who she saw standing in front of her.

“There she is,” the baron muttered in a tone that told Juliet he was not pleased with her tardiness, even though she could only be a couple of minutes later than expected. He walked to the door, his ill health still evident in the pallor of his skin and the unsteadiness of his gait, before he roughly took her arm and practically pulled her inside the room. “You're lucky that looks good on you,” he muttered as Juliet winced at the surprisingly strong grasp he kept on her arm. “Our guest has been waiting.”

The man was standing at the sideboard now, his back turned to them as he poured himself another drink. Juliet could feel her feet practically grounding into the plush Aubusson rug beneath her as

they drew closer, as though her body was telling her to run and avoid this meeting.

But it wasn't to be.

The man turned around, his eyes catching her, assessing her, their darkening into a cool glint the only sign that he recognized her or had any surprise at finding her here.

"Well, well," he said, smiling just wide enough to show his teeth, although somehow the expression was much more menacing than it was welcoming. "Who do we have here?"

"This is Juliet," the baron said, his words, however, making it obvious that it didn't much matter who she was. "As you can see, she is wearing the priceless diamond necklace I was telling you about."

"Yes, I recall," he said. "How... fitting. I'm sure she quite enjoys wearing such invaluable beauty."

He smirked, the words obviously for Juliet, and she recalled the last conversation she had had with this man.

Arie Hondros. Xander's brother. The man who had made it clear that she was nothing but a burden on their family, and that Xander's life would be much better without her in it.

"I am most grateful," she said, holding her head high, refusing to allow him to rattle her. She was most curious about what he was doing here, and whether Xander knew of his presence. Had this been part of their plan all along? And if so, why wouldn't Xander have shared that with her?

With Arie's eyes on her, the door opened once more, this time admitting Mr. Shiplack. Wonderful. Dinner with the three men she hated most in the world, with Xander nowhere in sight. Had he left? Or had the baron ordered him gone? Juliet felt she was going to go mad with the uncertainty around her. If only she knew what was happening, then she would be able to handle this evening with much more alacrity.

"Shiplack!" Lord Wilington greeted his old friend, whose eyes went to just above Juliet's bosom and although she shivered, she was well aware that as interested as Shiplack might be in her, he was far more interested in the jewels. "I'm glad to see you are well, my friend."

"Have you injured your nose recently?" Arie asked, never a man to miss anything, although one would have to be without sight to miss the purple swelling in the middle of Shiplack's face. "I've seen

a nose like that before, and it looks like one that has recently been broken.”

Shiplack cleared his throat as he straightened, accepting his glass of brandy. “I’m fine. Nothing to speak of.”

Juliet couldn’t help the small curl of a smile that hit her lips, a smile that Arie obviously didn’t miss as he studied her assessingly.

“Shiplack here knows a good deal about jewels himself,” the baron said. “It is how the two of us met — our affinity for beautiful things.”

He laughed at his joke before continuing. “I am sorry to hear that Mrs. Shiplack had to take her leave.”

“Yes, she was feeling rather ill and longed for the comforts of home,” Shiplack said with a shrug. “Perhaps we were near to overstaying our welcome, anyway.”

“Never!” Lord Wilington said, already having finished a few glasses of whisky and obviously feeling the effects. “Now, please allow me to introduce Mr. Sotherby. He purchases nearly priceless pieces of jewellery and finds buyers for them.”

“I see,” Shiplack said somewhat suspiciously. “And have you anyone interested in Lord Wilington’s collection?”

“I was most intrigued when I heard that some pieces might be for sale,” Arie said, not answering Shiplack’s question. “I had to come see them for myself. I am told they are not to be missed.”

While Juliet was all too aware of what colored the undertones of this conversation, she was also slightly irked that not one of them seemed to consider that she was anything more than a model for the necklace they were so intrigued with. How compelled would they be when it was finally purchased by the new owner, who just might discover it was made of paste?

“Will you be purchasing them shortly, to take back to London?” Shiplack asked, obviously trying to mask his interest in the answer.

“No,” Arie said smoothly, although Juliet could tell from his expression that he had also noticed Shiplack’s apparent interest, beyond what a friend or even colleague of the baron might wonder about. “I shall meet Lord Wilington in London when he returns.”

“If you really like the model so much,” the baron said, following and misunderstanding Arie’s gaze, “you’re welcome to keep her if that sweetens the deal.”

Juliet’s face filled with the heat of her ire, and she wished that, at some point, she would have the opportunity to tell the baron just

exactly what she thought of him and the way he treated her. She had to remind herself that she was more than making up for it by stealing his jewels.

“That’s all right,” Arie said, taking a sip of his brandy before staring at her over the top of it. “She’s not my type.”

And just at that moment, Xander walked in.

# Chapter 16

Xander had not been particularly enjoying playing the part of the footman, catering to the every desire of a man who had no care for the people who worked for him.

But never more so than in this moment did he wish he could shed the livery and walk across the room to join in the conversation.

The look on Juliet's face made it quite clear that she was not enjoying whatever banter the men around her exchanged, and he had a feeling that Arie was not making it any easier for her.

It was not that Arie didn't like Juliet. As far as Xander was aware, he liked Juliet as much as he liked anyone who wasn't part of his family. What he had never liked was how, as he put it, she had distracted Xander, taken his focus away.

Now when Arie looked across the room at where Xander had taken up his place near the door, his gaze told Xander that he had quickly ascertained just what had been "taking him so long," as he had put it when they had met outside of the gamekeeper's cottage.

He knew Arie was going to have plenty to say the next time they spoke alone — most likely regarding just why he and Damien hadn't mentioned Juliet's presence — but at the moment all Xander cared about was extricating Juliet from this dinner as soon as he could.

She was a woman who could navigate most situations with ease, who wasn't necessarily duplicitous, but capable, adaptable.

Tonight, however, she seemed lost at sea, and he wanted nothing more than to walk over and steer her through.

But even he didn't have a map for this. Not when Arie was involved — the seas became far too volatile. What concerned Xander the most was that, instead of considering Arie as her one potential ally, she was looking at him as though he was her worst enemy. But why?

"I see our footmen have finally decided to join us," the baron said with exasperation. "Shall we go in to dinner? When we are finished then Juliet will leave us and the real negotiations shall



begin.”

He spoke as though Juliet was a burden, a bother, and yet when Arie held out his elbow to escort her in to dinner, the look she gave him was so venomous, one would have thought he had been the one to make such a statement. Before Xander could give it any further consideration, however, they were walking past him, and he caught Juliet’s glance for only a moment, although he could tell it was filled with question.

Questions that he had no answers for.

Damien glanced at him sympathetically out of the corner of his eye, but there was nothing Damien could do to help.

There was nothing anyone could do. For Xander could foresee no way out of this with everyone getting what they wanted. No way at all.



\* \* \*

Arie stopped Juliet for a moment before they left the drawing room, passing his glass over to Xander, who eyed them both with an unease that Juliet felt right down to the pit of her stomach.

“I hope you have both enjoyed playing house here together,” Arie murmured, “because it is going to have some dire consequences.”

With his threat, he pulled Juliet away, although he kept them back several paces behind the baron.

“It is so interesting to find you here, Juliet.”

“I was about to say the same regarding you,” she said breezily, not wanting him to become aware of just how much she wanted to be away from him. “I was here long before you — or your brothers.”

Arie turned toward her, his dark eyes flashing.

“I told you years ago to stay away from Xander. Imagine my surprise to find you here with him again.”

“As it happens, my involvement here had nothing to do with Xander or Damien. We were equally surprised to find one another

here at Lochrich.”

“But since they arrived, let me guess, you’ve been using Xander to further your own plans?”

Juliet scowled. “It is *nothing* like that. We each had our own plans and decided to work together.”

“Oh, is that what he told you?” Arie asked, lifting a brow, apparently no longer caring that the baron and Shiplack had continued into the dining room without them. “I spoke with Xander this afternoon and he made no mention of sharing any of the treasures with you or anyone else. He assured me that all was well and that we would have them within a day.”

“How interesting,” Juliet murmured, considering the number of jewels she and Annabelle had already carefully and safely stowed away. Xander knew of what they had done, although he didn’t know their whereabouts.

“Listen, Juliet,” Arie said, his face softening and Juliet knew that he was about to change tactics. “It doesn’t have to be like this. You shouldn’t be living this life. When you and Xander left one another last time, it was for the best. We all knew that. Don’t slip back into the past. You should go on, continue to live your life without this trouble, and be happy.”

She turned to him now, the last pieces of control beginning to ebb away.

“First of all, we did not leave *each other*, as you well know. He left me, and I am beginning to think that you might have had something to do with that. Secondly, you have no say in what I do with my life. Not then, not now, not ever. And finally, if this life is so troublesome, then why were your own sisters a part of it for so many years? Or were they too valuable for you to give up?”

As his jaw clenched, she knew she had struck a blow, but she followed his gaze toward the door leading to the dining room, catching Shiplack looking inquiringly out at the pair of them.

“We’ll speak of this later,” he said, his teeth gritted.

Juliet rubbed her forehead as she turned around, looking for Xander, but he was nowhere to be found. What was he doing and were they going to get out of this mess together — or separately?



\* \* \*

Xander and Damien were currently filling trays with courses to serve the four people in the dining room — two people Xander cared for and two he hated in nearly equal measure.

“Arie did not seem particularly pleased,” Damien noted as though it was just a passing thought, causing Xander to shoot him an annoyed glance.

“That would be putting it mildly.”

“I never did understand why he didn’t support you and Juliet,” Damien said with a shrug. “If there was ever a woman who fit with our family, it would be she.”

“I know,” Xander said quietly, looking around to make sure that none of the other servants were listening in. “I think that was part of the problem. He thought she caused me to lack focus, and he was always worried that she was just using me, that in the end she would only look out for what was best for herself.”

Damien paused before looking at Xander out of the corner of his eye. “Do you think there is any truth to that?”

Xander sighed. “I’m not sure what to believe. I’d like to say no, but at the same time, we found her hiding away half the jewellery with no apparent intention to tell us of it.”

“Trust is easily broken yet difficult to both build and repair,” Damien mused, causing Xander to grin despite all of the turmoil winding around his mind.

“I didn’t realize you were such a philosopher.”

Damien chuckled as he shrugged one shoulder. “I have my moments. But it’s the truth. It probably didn’t help that you disappeared all afternoon.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Xander asked as he hefted the tray. “It’s not as though I could tell Arie that I had to go talk to Juliet.”

“You could have mentioned her.”

“Likely should have,” he agreed.

After Arie had surprised them near the cottage, they had

retreated farther into the trees surrounding the grounds to discuss all that had occurred. Arie had not been pleased at the time it was taking them to complete their mission, and told them he had decided that he had no choice but to come see what was taking so long.

“The jewels are hidden away through a secret passageway that is only accessible through Wilington’s bedroom, where he has been convalescing, and even then through a set of locks that are nearly impossible to pick,” Xander had tried to explain, but Arie wasn’t hearing it — he said that Xander could pick any lock he put his mind to.

“These are different, and you never did send me the tools I requested,” Xander had protested, but Arie told him that he couldn’t always rely on him for help, and that they needed to work faster.

“I can keep the baron occupied,” Arie had said. “Tomorrow I will ask him to take me on a tour of the land. In the meantime, the two of you must get into that room, get the jewellery, and then we will be gone.”

“There’s something else,” Xander had added. “The Shiplacks are involved somehow. I’m not sure if they are aiding Wilington or attempting to steal the jewels themselves — or both — but Shiplack’s wife was supposed to be at home with an illness, and she is currently within that cottage, which is full of all the requirements to leave in a hurry. I don’t know what is happening, but it’s become far too complicated and we need to be free of this place.”

They had nodded, although Xander had felt Damien’s stare on him. For they not only had to get the hidden jewels, but they had to determine what to do about those that Juliet and Annabelle had already hidden away — and they had to do so without Arie finding out, for he would never understand how they had allowed the two women to get ahead of them.

Xander knew it was foolish not to have mentioned Juliet at all, but he also knew now why he hadn’t. Arie would have immediately assumed what he did now — that Xander had been stalling because he had been wanting to spend more time with Juliet, that he wanted to help her and include her in their scheme.

And he would have been partially right.

Just before they pushed open the doors of the dining room, Xander stopped and turned back to Damien, his voice low.

“Tonight, I’ll speak to Juliet. I’ll try to include her, get her to

share the jewels with us. Tomorrow, we'll break in and steal the rest. Then we're all out of here, for good."

"Very well," Damien said, always one to follow the lead of the rest of them as long as the end result was an amiable one for all involved.

Then they pushed open the doors, playing their part as they served the dinner party.

Xander wished he could reach out and tell Juliet that everything would be all right. He could tell from the stiffness in her posture that she found herself in a most uncomfortable position and would rather be anywhere but her current seat. There was nothing he could do at the moment, however.

He looked up, meeting Arie's eyes, trying to silently issue him a warning plea to look after Juliet and not aggravate her any further. But Arie looked away, though he was certainly not oblivious — Arie never was. No. He simply didn't care, and the way he responded was answer enough.

# Chapter 17

That was likely the most excruciatingly painful dinner Juliet had ever been a part of.

Shiplack, Arie, and Lord Wilington had spent most of it trying to determine just which of them was the most masculine and boasted the finest achievements. She knew Arie well enough to know that while he was certainly proud of his accomplishments, he was not known to outwardly boast — he allowed the fear and respect of others around him to speak to that for him.

No, Arie knew how to fit in with whatever crowd he chose. Which he was choosing to do right now.

When the dinner was cleared, she gracefully rose, waiting a moment until the men finally realized she was no longer sitting.

“If you will excuse me for a moment,” she said, beginning to back away from the table, and the baron frowned at her.

“I haven’t told you to leave yet,” he said.

“I shall return momentarily,” she began, but he cut her off.

“You only need to stay for a few more minutes so that we can examine the piece. Then my valet will meet you to take it away.”

She nodded slowly. She certainly wouldn’t want to exchange the piece for the fake before they began to look at it more carefully. She slid back into her seat.

“I suppose I can wait a few minutes.”

And then she would have to determine how to exchange it with Annabelle before the valet arrived to take it from her.

“As lovely as it looks around your neck,” Arie said with a slick smile, “perhaps I could see it off of it?”

He held out his hand and Juliet lifted her fingers to undo the clasp, but Shiplack was there before she could.

“Allow me,” he said, and when his fingers brushed against her skin it took everything within Juliet to keep from shivering in horror.

She could practically feel Xander’s distress from across the room, but there was nothing to be done about it. Not without giving themselves away.

Arie palmed the heavy necklace, his eyes gleaming as though he was feasting his gaze upon a lover undressing for him.

From what Juliette remembered of him, he far preferred his wealth and the artifacts that brought it to him than he did any woman.

“Beautiful,” he said, his words finally true, without a hint of artifice. His fingers slid over the surface, and as Xander came to fill the men’s glasses, she met his eyes, noting the worry held within them as he glanced at Arie and then turned to watch her.

She attempted a smile to tell him that she was fine, but she struggled with it.

Finally, Arie passed it back, and this time she clutched it in her hands before Shiplack could attempt to reclasp it once more.

“I really must excuse myself for just a moment. I shall have my maid help me with this.”

“No need. Grant will be waiting for it,” the baron said breezily as Juliet turned to go, and she looked up at Xander with worry as she hurried out of the room, hopeful that she could be quicker than the valet.

She was out of luck.

For there was the faithful guard dog, standing outside the door.

“Miss Simpson,” he said without expression, holding out a hand. “The necklace?”

Juliet had two choices. She could give him the necklace — or she could run.

But if she did so, she would still have to find Annabelle, and then their hidden collection. If the grooms were apprised of their actions, there would be no way for them to make off with a horse as planned.

She swallowed hard as she looked longingly at the necklace in her hand before passing it to Grant.

“Of course,” she said, her words just above a whisper, and, either not noticing or uncaring about her apparent dismay, he turned and walked away, heels clicking as he went.

The dining room doors opened behind her, and Xander was at her side in moments. While he held a tray in one hand, the other came to caress her shoulder as the doors shut behind him.

“Not to worry, sweet,” he said with a squeeze of his hand. “We’ll get it back. I promise. And I’ll explain everything. Meet me tonight in the gazebo.”

She nodded absently before beginning to climb the stairs to meet Annabelle, feeling Xander's gaze on her as she went, his solid presence, at the very least, a buffer between her and the men who threatened her in the room beyond.



\* \* \*

Xander just wanted this evening over so that he could meet with Juliet.

As he had watched her melancholy figure climb up the stairs, so alone, without him, one thing had become clear.

When he left this house, he cared not if he had any of the jewels. All he wanted was her, and her alone.

But that had become even more complicated, now that Arie was here.

For to tell Arie this would only prove Arie's original point — that Juliet made him forget his obligations to his family.

The men finally decided to retire for the evening once Wilington was slumped over in his chair, from exhaustion, ill health, drink, or all three, and after Xander and Damien once again left him in his room, they found Arie waiting for them downstairs.

"Well, well, well," Arie said as he stood at the landing, cutting off Xander's escape down to the servants' quarters. "Tonight has proven some very interesting revelations."

"I assume you are referring to Juliet," Xander said as Damien led them into one of the small parlors. The fire wasn't lit, but the cold didn't bother any of them. They had all experienced far worse.

"Interesting that you failed to mention her involvement — her very *presence* — earlier today," Arie said, losing all of the fraudulent charm he had cloaked himself with throughout the evening.

"It doesn't matter," said Xander. "All will go forward as planned."

"I'm not an idiot, Xander," Arie said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I am well aware that you would never leave her with nothing. You are too soft-hearted for that."



"It is true that she is here for the same purpose that we are," Xander admitted, seeing no way around it. Arie always ferreted out the truth. "However, she knows that there are certain pieces that she will be unable to take with her."

"You mean, there won't be *any* pieces."

"Arie..." Xander attempted to find the humanity he knew was within his eldest brother, the man who had taken care of him and his sister when he had thought all was lost. "We cannot leave her with nothing. She has spent months—"

"Whoring herself?" Arie said, arching an eyebrow, and Xander's fingers begin to curl into a fist at his side.

"She has *not*," Xander said, hearing the tightness of the words as they emerged.

"Do you know that for certain?" Arie asked, taking a step closer to Xander, and Xander knew in that moment that if Arie said one more thing to question Juliet's character, he would have no qualms in placing his fist in the middle of Arie's face, just as he had done to Shiplack.

"That's enough," Damien said, stepping between them as he attempted to break the tension in the air. "Xander is right. Juliet has been doing nothing different from what we've done, and we promised to work together."

"How could you promise that, when you knew of our plan? We promised Jasper that we would retake the jewels so that he could get back what he is owed. After we have finished that, there will hardly be enough left for us, let alone Juliet."

"That necklace alone will fetch thousands," Xander protested.

"You've already given her everything," Arie practically hissed. "How could she need more?"

"She never received what I gave her," Xander said, rubbing his temple. "The woman she lived with stole it all."

"Well, then, you're the fool for not seeing to it properly and for deciding to give it to her in the first place."

"It was rather hard, when *you* got me so involved with another plan that I had no time to ensure Juliet was well," Xander said as it all began to become clear. "In fact, I believe you did it all on purpose, as you wanted to drive us apart. I don't understand, Arie, what is it about her that you hate so?"

"It's not about her," Arie said, loosening his arms and tossing them to the side. "It's about you! She makes you lose your mind,

Xander.”

“Of course she does — because I love her!”

The words hung in the air, floating between them, as Arie’s generous brows rose.

“Do you now. And how much do you love her — more than your family, than the people who have done everything for you, than the man who took you in when no one else offered you anything but a life of petty crime?”

“Our life is one of crime as well.”

“True, but at least it is a lucrative one. I have never heard you complain about the roof over your head or your warm meals, or the maids who look after the house so that you don’t have to.”

Xander rubbed at his temples, the headache beginning to invade. He was not a man who enjoyed conflict — he never had. He and Arie had butted heads time and again, but only once before had it ever been like this — the last time that he had left Juliet. The time when he had chosen his family over her, telling himself that he had done it only so that she could make a better life for herself.

But perhaps that was only part of it. He was beginning to realize that it was also his inability to stand up to his family — most especially Arie — and do what he needed to do.

“There is room in my heart for all of you — Juliet *and* the entire family. If you can’t understand that, Arie, then it is not me who is lacking.”

“And does she love you in turn?” Arie asked.

“Of course she does,” Xander said indignantly. “It was I who made the choice to leave.”

“Yes, but when I told her that you were just using her, that you cared nothing for her, she believed me so readily. A woman who truly loved you, who trusted you, would never be so gullible.”

“What are you talking about?” Xander demanded, and Arie shrugged, apparently unaffected by Xander’s anger.

“I went to see her after you left her. Offered her money if she promised to never look for you again. She never did, did she?”

“She didn’t take that money, I know she didn’t.”

“No. But she also realized the truth of it — that she didn’t fit properly into your life. She never had.”

Xander found he couldn’t speak, that he was so angry his mouth wouldn’t form the words he longed to say to his brother, the man he had always trusted — or thought he had trusted.

Xander looked over at Damien, who was watching somewhat helplessly. He found if he focused on Damien, he could say what was necessary. Then, he would never speak to Arie again. “Take Wilington out tomorrow,” he bit out. “Damien and I will get the jewels. Then we’ll leave. All of us — including Juliet. As for you, I care nothing about where you go or what you do after this, for I don’t want you in my life anymore. Do you understand?”

“Sure, Xander,” Arie said, that suspicious grin creeping across his face. “Whatever you say.”

Ignoring Arie, Xander nodded to Damien, then took off into the night to find Juliet.

# Chapter 18

When Xander hadn't immediately appeared, Juliet began to fill herself with all kinds of assumptions. That he had changed his mind, had decided he wanted nothing more to do with her. That he was going to align himself entirely with his family and take the jewels alone.

Which she supposed he was well within his rights to do. They had agreed to work together, but had made no promises for the future, and she was just as ready to leave with all of the jewels — alone — as he was, if it came to that.

But she was desperately hoping with everything in her that it wouldn't.

When his familiar figure came jaunting through the trees, she breathed a sigh of relief, and as her entire body stepped forward toward him, she inherently knew what had always been within her but that she had been too scared to voice aloud — she wanted him. She needed to be with him, and loved him with all of her heart. But could he possibly feel the same?

"Juliet." He stepped from the dark of night into the gazebo, his arms coming around her and pulling her into his embrace, and she knew in that moment just how much she loved him, how coming to him meant coming home, no matter where they were or what lay between them or before them. "Are you all right?" he asked, pulling back for a moment, and she looked up into his eyes.

"Of course I'm all right."

"Seeing you in there, surrounded by men who have all treated you wrongly, it just didn't seem right. I wanted nothing more than to pick you up and take you far away from all of them."

"Well, that would have made us rather obvious, would it not have?"

"It most certainly would have. But I don't know if I overly care anymore."

She stepped back, searching his troubled expression.

"What's changed?"

"Nothing." He let out a deep breath of air.

But she knew that he was keeping something from her.

"I have come to realize that no matter what happens here over the next day, when this is over, the most important thing to me is that you and I are together. I made a mistake five years ago, Juliet, and I want to right that mistake. Will you let me?"

Despite Arie's accusations and all of the misgivings that filled her, his request caused everything else to float away, and she couldn't help the smile that broke out across her face.

"Of course, Xander," she said, standing on her toes so that her face was more even with his. "I want nothing more."

He tipped his head the remaining distance between them and kissed her, long and hard, a kiss that Juliet took to be a promise of everything that was currently between them and everything to come. She wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him close as their kiss deepened, connecting them, strengthening the bond between them. She couldn't have asked for anything more, and when they finally broke apart, she found herself gasping for air.

She cupped his cheeks in her palms. "What are we going to do?"

"About what?"

"About... this," she said, gesturing to the house behind them. "Us. The necklace. The rest of the jewels."

"Not to worry," he said, taking her hands. "I have a plan."

"Which is?"

"It doesn't matter. Just pack your things and be ready to leave when I come for you."

"Xander," she said, trying to stamp down her impatience, especially when he had just said everything to her that she had been longing to hear. "I trust you, but I also need to know what is happening."

"Very well," he said, even though she could tell he was struggling with how much to tell her. "Tomorrow, Arie is going to ask the baron for a tour of the lands. Our hope is that Shiplack will accompany them, and Damien and I will then break into Wilington's hidden closet."

She nodded slowly. "And then?"

"Then we leave."

"Together?"

"Together."

She took his hands and gave them a squeeze, torn between past distrust and hope for the future. Hope infused with her love for

him. She wanted nothing more than to believe him.

“What did Arie have to say about that?”

“It doesn’t matter what Arie thinks,” he said, looking off into the distance, for the first time breaking the contact between them, and Juliet wondered at the vehemence in his tone.

“Of course it does,” she protested. “It always matters what Arie thinks — for Arie is involved in everything, is he not?”

“He thinks he is,” Xander muttered. “But I will make sure all is well. Trust me on that.”

Juliet took a breath. She wasn’t built to trust — no one but herself. And even that sometimes was shaky.

“Very well,” she said slowly. “I will tell you where the rest of the jewels are hidden, and we will find them together before we prepare for tomorrow.”



\* \* \*

So far, everything had gone to plan.

In fact, it had gone to plan so well that Xander was somewhat worried.

Juliet had agreed that they would go find the jewels this morning, upon which they would tuck them away in the hidden compartment of the carriage that Arie had arrived in.

And Wilington had agreed to tour Arie around the property later that afternoon.

Xander donned his cap before telling Damien where he was going, asking his brother to cover for him if he was required for any duty.

“Where shall I say you are?”

“Say I went to town to buy something.”

“It’s not your day off.”

“It doesn’t matter, Damien,” Xander said with some exasperation. “What are they going to do — get rid of me? I shall be leaving anyway.”

“Very well,” Damien said with a shrug before continuing on as

Xander walked across the grounds, thankfully finding Juliet on the other side of the trees as they had planned. Annabelle accompanied her, and together the three of them trudged along until Juliet suddenly stopped.

"Here. We buried them here," she said, crouching to take a closer look before moving the leaves. "We buried them here... where there is now a huge hole in the ground."

She looked up at Annabelle and Xander, her eyes wild as she looked between them. "Where did they go?"

"The last I saw them, they were right here," Annabelle said, biting her lip as she looked around, as though the jewels might come jumping out of one of the trees. "Could someone have found them?"

"How?" Juliet said, lifting her arms to the side. "No one else knew they were here. No one else knew we were hiding them. No one else would have any reason to believe that the proper jewels are not all sitting within the baron's safe." Her head slowly turned, until her eyes rested upon Xander. "Until I told you last night."

"Yes, when we made a plan to come find them together," Xander said, not pleased at the way Juliet's eyes began to narrow as she looked at him. "You don't really think that I would come here first and take them, then return with you — do you?"

Juliet stared at him a moment more, before lifting her hands. "I don't know what to think. You didn't tell anyone about them — did you?"

Xander shifted from one foot to the other. "I told Damien what we were doing."

"You told Damien — who likely told Arie. The man who wants me long gone from here — and from you — and is determined to prevent me from having any piece of this?"

"I don't know, Juliet, I really don't, but I promise you that I didn't think Damien would tell him. Perhaps he overheard us, I—" Xander tossed his hands up, holding out one toward her. "I have to trust Damien. I really don't think he would have come here behind my back and—"

Juliet groaned aloud, her frustration evident.

"Why are you so obstinately loyal? Ask them, Xander. See what they have to say. I'm sure Arie has them hidden away somewhere. And I'm fairly certain — now more than ever — that he has no intentions of allowing me to have any of it."

“But that’s the thing,” Xander said, turning to her, lifting her hands again, hoping she would understand. “It doesn’t matter. Because you will be with me, so what I have is yours.”

“And I will be reliant on you once again.”

“What do you mean?” Xander asked, his brows furrowing as Annabelle silently watched their exchange.

“I told you that we would work together, and I trusted you to see this through with me. But at the end of this, we are still splitting everything as discussed. I am not going to simply trust in your benevolence. Because at the end of the day, we know it is all tied to Arie’s, and he doesn’t have any for me.”

Xander’s chest tightened at her words. “I thought you trusted me.”

“I did. I do. But I don’t trust Arie. And you need to understand why I don’t. He told me himself that he thinks the two of us are better off alone. That I only keep you from your calling and that my life is better without you. But that is not true. Not at all. I need you to understand that.”

Xander nodded slowly, backing away as though he needed to put some distance between them. “I have to go talk to him before he leaves on his tour with Wilington. But please, Juliet, be ready to go — to come with me — to trust me? Please?”

“Decide what you want, Xander,” she said, her expression troubled, “and we will go from there.”

As arranged, they walked back separately so as not to arouse suspicion, but Xander could practically feel the tension radiating away from her back toward him, and he didn’t like it — not one bit. Something was wrong. He could feel it deep within. He only wished he knew whether it was Juliet, Arie, or the entire plan itself.



# Chapter 19

“Juliet!”

Juliet looked up from where she was packing her dresses to see Annabelle at the door, motioning frantically for her to come out.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, immediately concerned, but Annabelle was already down the corridor and out of hearing, leaving Juliet no choice but to follow. Annabelle crouched down in front of one of the other bedroom doors, kneeling before it.

“What are you doing?” Juliet whispered as she crouched down next to her, but Annabelle kept a finger on her lips as she tilted her head toward the door. Juliet looked at her in concern, but she had always trusted Annabelle, and she wasn’t about to stop now.

“Where are they?”

Xander’s voice rang out from within, and she and Annabelle exchanged a glance. So this must be Arie’s room.

“They’re hidden,” Arie said, his voice as devoid of emotion as ever.

“I told Damien that Juliet and I would be digging them up. Never did I ask Damien — and most especially you — to do so.”

“Yes, but I told you that we wouldn’t be sharing anything with Juliet.”

“We’ve been over this, Arie,” Xander said, and Juliet could hear the exasperation in his voice. “I’m not leaving Juliet with nothing. Not again.”

There was a pause before Arie answered.

“Fine. Choose a bauble or two and let her keep them. As long as you’ll be leaving her, that’s all that matters. This time, though, make sure she actually gets your parting gift. Don’t trust her little friend.”

Annabelle gasped in annoyance at that, but Juliet’s heart was already speeding up at everything else Arie had to say. She waited for Xander to refute Arie, to tell him that, in fact, Juliet would be coming with them as they were beginning their life together — the life that should have started five years ago — but no objection was apparently forthcoming.

“Does she still think that you are going to be leaving together?” A third voice. Damien’s. A ball of panic began to form within Juliet’s stomach. Xander may lie to Arie in order for them to leave with the plan intact, but he would never lie to Damien — would he?

“She does,” Xander confirmed, and Annabelle placed a hand on Juliet’s bent knee. “I told her that she could ride in the carriage back to London. In the meantime, as long as she stays, she will not give us away.”

“Good,” Arie said. “You’ve done well, Xander, and I’m happy that you now understand I did what I had to do in the past. I know it isn’t easy, when you have feelings for another, but your family will always come first, and I’m glad you’ve finally come to understand that. Now. You best get yourself prepared, as I must get ready for this abysmal ride around Wilington’s grounds.”

Juliet and Annabelle exchanged a look of alarm before they began to scramble backwards, Juliet stumbling as she found she had placed too much weight on her right foot and now she could barely feel it as she hurried after Annabelle. She cringed as the feeling began to rush back to her foot but pushed it aside as she continued before she fell into her room after Annabelle.

Her friend immediately turned around and placed her hands on Juliet’s shoulders.

“Juliet. I’m so sorry. I heard them talking and I thought it best to listen. I never knew that you would have to hear such things—”

Juliet closed her eyes and shook her head. “There is nothing for *you* to apologize for. Xander was the one who lied, who continued to go behind my back again.”

The melancholy began to drift away, to be replaced by a slow-burning rage deep within her. “Do you know, just last night he stood there in that garden gazebo and told me how much he cared for me, how we were going to begin a life together. I knew that he could be duplicitous, but I never knew he could outright lie so blatantly and be so uncaring that he could leave me like this *again*. What is wrong with the man? And more to that, what is wrong with *me* that I have allowed him to do this twice?”

“I know you care for him, Juliet, I do,” Annabelle said, her pity nearly breaking Juliet. “But he’s shown his true self far too many times now.”

She dropped her arms, her eyes narrowing as she stared at Juliet

determinately.

“You are stronger than this, Juliet. We are done with this. What we are going to do now is make a life for ourselves. One which requires no men. One in which we will not be betrayed. Do you understand? We have to find those jewels. We have to leave this place. And we have to never think about Xander Murphy again.”

Even as Juliet’s heart began to break deep within her, she swallowed the tears and nodded, knowing that what Annabelle said was true.

“But we don’t have the necklace. And we have no way of getting it,” she said with exasperation, rubbing the back of her neck as she thought on it, before she looked toward Annabelle. “Who says that we can’t use *them* in turn?”

“What do you mean?”

“They said they were going to steal the jewels. They said they were going to offer us a ride back to London. Why don’t we take it? Then we can steal it all back and escape from them before we make it there.”

Annabelle’s lips began to curl into a smile. “I like it. It’s perfect.”

“Very good,” she said, her words belying the heartbreak within her. She had thought that she and Xander had everything resolved. Yes, there had been some hesitancy, some mistrust, but she had been sure that beneath it all, there was still a love strong enough to bind them together, no matter what came their way. But in the end, he had once again put his family first. She had nothing against them, and would never want to cause a rift between them — but she had hoped that Xander would have stood up to Arie, would have made him realize that their family now included her as well. How wrong she had been.

Juliet squared her shoulders. “Let’s prepare to leave. And then, we put our plan into action.”



\* \* \*

Xander and Damien decided that they would first check on the

gamekeeper's cottage and see if Mrs. Shiplack was still within so that they would not be surprised when they attempted their own recovery of the jewels. Peeking through the windows, they saw she was nowhere to be found, but decided they were safest to enter the passageway through the study. They gathered their tools, hoping they wouldn't see anyone on their way — guest or servant, for both would be well aware who they were and where they were supposed to be — and where they shouldn't be.

Fortunately, no one noticed them, and Xander breathed a sigh of relief when he rounded the door of the passageway and the darkness encompassed them until Damien turned and the light from his lantern brightened the wall before them.

In silence they moved together through the corridor, before stopping in front of the one door that had thus far eluded them.

"Here we are," Damien said. "Time for you to go to work."

Xander nodded even though Damien couldn't see him before kneeling before the door. He found his familiar tools by feel inside the bag, then easily turned the first lock before coming to the other two. He had studied these locks far too many times now, and had finally — he hoped — solved their puzzle. He placed one instrument within before closing his eyes and he turned the other part of the lock by feel, murmuring to it as he hoped that it would listen to him and turn on its own. He was beginning to swear in frustration when he heard the click, and he nearly cried out in exaltation and relief when the lock started to turn.

"Got it," he exclaimed, causing Damien to slap him on the shoulder in congratulations, and then he asked Damien to shed his light on the final lock, the highest one.

He groaned aloud.

"Someone has been here," he murmured, "and nearly destroyed the lock. There is no way I can pick this one. Not in the state that it's currently in."

Damien bent himself to look at it, his sigh a reflection of Xander's own mood.

"So what now?"

"This is why I brought multiple tools," he said grimly. "The others show no signs of us being here. This lock, however, will ensure that if anyone inspects this door, they will know that there was a thief."

"Too late for that," Damien said. "Do you think they've already

been within?"

"No, they tried to force the first lock but couldn't get through," Xander said. "The only way would be from the other side."

He picked up his chisel and hammer before looking up at Damien.

"If anyone is within the room, they will certainly know what we are doing."

"Good thing everyone is out riding."

"Good thing."

He picked up the hammer, driving it down on the chisel again and again, until the lock finally began to come loose. He continued until finally it broke free entirely, falling to the floor below them with a loud bang. With every noise, Xander flinched, but there was nothing to be done.

He stood, exchanged a look of acceptance with Damien for whatever was to come, and then pushed open the door, ready for what awaited them within.



\* \* \*

Juliet paced back and forth in the front parlor.

It had been far too long.

Far too long since she knew Xander and Damien had gone into the tunnel.

Far too long since Lord Wilington, Arie, and Shiplack had gone on their ride around the estate.

Far too long since she had been left with her packing and her worries.

She didn't like not being in control, having to rely on someone else. Especially someone who was currently betraying her.

She also didn't like this constant state of worry for someone who she loved — even if he obviously didn't feel the same for her. She had no idea what she was supposed to do besides wait, but she didn't like it. Not one bit.

Suddenly the parlor doors burst open, and Juliet whirled

around, surprised to find the baron striding through, dressed in his travelling clothes.

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"I thought you were touring the estate?"

"Plans have changed. We are leaving."

"Leaving?"

He stepped up toward her, finger raised in front of him and pointed at her chest.

"Does it matter? Prepare yourself to leave, woman."

"For tomorrow?" she asked, using her façade of an unintelligent woman to feign ignorance.

"For tonight."

"Tonight?" she echoed him, this time her surprise evident. "We couldn't possibly. It will be dark. I can never get my things packed in time. I—"

"If I say we are leaving tonight, we are leaving tonight," the baron practically snarled. "Tell your lady's maid to prepare you. Now come with me. I need your help."

She picked up one side of her skirts and began to follow him. What could he possibly need her help with? He had someone to help him with everything, and she could hardly—

When he began to climb the stairs toward his bedchamber, however, she was already shaking her head, even before he said anything. "I'm sorry, my lord, but I must see to something, I—"

"You have to come because I have a drawer of sorts that I cannot open alone," he snapped, but his eyes glinting his frustration. "Now, come, before I have to do something to convince you otherwise."

Juliet gripped the banister and reluctantly followed him up.

"Where are Mr. Shiplack and the jewellery appraiser?"

"That's none of your concern."

Juliet pursed her lips together. She was aware that most women were content with listening to what the men in their lives told them to do, but she was not one of those women.

It was one of the reasons she had always been so grateful for Xander, who never treated her in such a way, but instead had always been quite respectful.

To her face, at least.

The baron led her into his bedroom, and she looked around for the ever-present valet.

“Where is Grant?” she asked.

“He has other responsibilities,” he said. “Now, come into the closet and help me open this.”

Juliet’s heart began to quicken. The place he pointed to was the closet where Xander guessed he hid all of his jewels. Was she about to see all of them? Or had Xander and Damien already escaped with them all?

Lord Wilington pressed on a hook overhead. While he was holding it, he nodded to Juliet. “As I push this, pull the door open.”

“Where is the handle?”

“Beneath the shelf.”

She crouched below, finally finding what she was looking for and nodded. It was an intricate set-up, and she could see why Xander and Damien hadn’t been able to get in, besides the fact that it would always require two people to open.

“Pull, woman!”

*That was one way to ask for help*, Juliet thought grimly as she pulled with all of her might. She almost fell over backward when the shelf eventually flung out toward her, nearly pinning her against the wall on the other side.

She was brought back to the moment only by the baron’s sudden bellow, and she stood abruptly, coming over to see what was the matter.

She smiled grimly over his shoulder. There were rows and rows of velvet, with indentations where jewellery should have been.

Instead, it was all empty, and beyond, where there should have been a wall, a door opened into darkness.

# Chapter 20

Xander blinked his eyes open, trying to focus on what was in front of him.

But everything seemed to be swimming, hazy, while in his ears was nothing but a hum, his head dully aching when he tried to turn it to look around.

He attempted to stand, but when he was unsuccessful, he realized that he was tied to a chair, with his hands bound behind him and his feet tied to the bottom.

“It’s no use.”

Damien’s voice — coming from behind him.

“The ropes are too strong. And there’s no one left to come to save us.”

Xander shook his head despite the throbbing and blinked again, this time his eyes focusing through the dim light to see Arie sitting across from him, his mouth set in a grim line as he stared at him from the chair in which he was equally bound. So all three of them were here — Damien behind him and Arie across from him. His heart began to pound as he thought of Juliet, alone in the house. He hoped she would know to escape, to take Annabelle and get away from here, jewels or not.

“It was a trap,” Arie grunted, obviously as displeased with himself as he was with anyone else. “As soon as we were out of sight of the house, Shiplack held me by gunpoint. The two of them brought me here, to this cottage.”

“Before coming back to find us,” Xander said grimly as the memories began to return.

He recalled opening the closet door to find the jewels spread out before them. He and Damien had quickly filled their bags, but when they turned back to re-enter the tunnel, they found Mrs. Shiplack had been waiting for them, dual pistols levelled and a look in her eye that said she wasn’t a stranger to using them. Xander had turned to see if escape through the bedroom was possible, but when he had turned, Shiplack had been waiting with a shovel. He must have hit him in the back of the head.



Now here they all were.

“Did they take the jewels?” Xander asked Arie.

“They did. Although if it’s any consolation, much of what they have are Juliet’s paste and pinchback.”

He grinned at that, but Xander wasn’t amused. This was not the time to joke, especially when it came to Juliet’s careful planning, which they now had completely ruined.

“Why the long face, Xander?” Arie continued, tilting his head to the side. “You’re usually the one who has a word of encouragement, who tells us all that it’s going to be all right.”

“Maybe I would,” Xander said, the rage that had begun to boil within him now threatening to spill over the edge, “if it was just us here. If I knew that we would be able to get out of this alive and well. If Juliet wasn’t inside, at the mercy of the men who somehow managed to trick all three of us!”

“I thought you decided that we were just using Juliet to help us with this scheme,” Arie said, arching an eyebrow in that way of his that Xander usually found amusing but today only caused him irritation.

“I lied, all right?” Xander burst out, trying to jump from the chair, forgetting about the tight binds for a moment. “I wanted you to go along with the plan, to not leave her behind again. I knew that if you thought I was still planning on taking her along, you would cut us both out of everything.”

Arie grinned smugly.

“Ah, Xander. Did you really think you could lie to me?”

“Lie to you?”

“I knew you made it all up, that you were still planning on going along with her. I was only hoping that if I showed you benevolence, you would realize where your true loyalties should lie.”

“Don’t you understand?” Xander asked in exasperation. “I don’t need to split my loyalties between you and her. If you would only accept how I feel about her, then there would be no cause for deception. There would be no cause for lies. I could be myself, with you and with her, and not worry about what else might come.”

Arie subjected him to an assessing stare, without artifice in his gaze. But before he could respond, Damien cut in.

“As much as I believe that the two of you should certainly sort through all of this, I’m not sure that this is the right time to do so. We’ve been given time alone — perhaps we best make a plan?”

"I've got one," Xander said, nodding his head. He may have been verbally sparring with Arie, but he still knew what he had to do. There is no question about it, no thought process, just instinct — he had to escape and protect Juliet.

Before they could take any action or discuss anything further, however, the door of the gamekeeper's cottage opened, and in walked Mr. and Mrs. Shiplack.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Mrs. Shiplack asked, walking into the room with a feline grin on her face. Gone was the empty-headed, ill-treated wife, and in her place a partner, an adversary. Xander braced himself, for those who could so easily deceive were often the most dangerous. He was well aware from his own experience.

"They came too close. Got into the safe," Shiplack grunted as he followed her, a matching pistol in his hand. "We're to take care of them."

"Just what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?" Arie asked from his corner.

"You shut your mouth. You were never supposed to be involved."

Xander glanced at his brother, wondering what had caused the others to become suspicious of him in the first place.

As though he had heard Xander's question, Shiplack continued. "I received word from London. There was no such art dealer as you. You lied to the baron, and he blamed me for it."

"Well, you were the one who found me and brought me to Wilington's attention, so I suppose he was right to do so."

"Enough!" Shiplack shouted as his face turned purple, and Xander noted that the man was not able to keep his anger under control. "Continue and I will gag you."

He turned back around to Xander and Damien. "As for the two of you, you are no one. Footmen. No one will miss you. But you know, I don't blame you for trying to take Wilington's collection. Hell, I tried to myself."

Xander did his best to rub the ropes of his bonds against the chair. Once a man started confessing, it meant that he had no fear his captive could ever tell another. It wasn't a good sign, and they had to get out of here before it grew too late.

"Why didn't you?" Damien asked, obviously trying to keep Shiplack talking, to buy some time.

"I tried. Couldn't get into the damn safe," Shiplack said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Besides, the baron upped the price tag as well as my portion of what I'd receive. I earned it, after all. Helped him buy the jewels for less, by tricking the man who sold them to him, then found him a man who would pay more than they were worth."

"Or so you thought," Mrs. Shiplack added, and Shiplack turned his red face toward her.

"Enough."

Mrs. Shiplack's eyes narrowed, worrying Xander as he realized she might be far more dangerous than her husband.

"I have plans," Shiplack said, his eyes gleaming. "I'm to be Wilington's equal partner on everything. Once he dies, I'll receive all of his collection."

"All except that which will go to his heir," Xander pointed out, and Shiplack walked over to him, leaning down overtop of him.

"You're wrong. This will not be entailed."

Xander shrugged — or, at least, tried to.

"So you think. But do you know for sure what the baron has planned? Maybe you are just a vain acquaintance, a man he is using to get what he wants."

"That is *not* true!" Shiplack lashed out. "We are friends — good friends. And we are leaving together. We are all going to Bath — me and the missus, with Wilington and his woman."

His eyes gleamed at the mention of Juliet, and Xander's fingers drew themselves into fists, although he retained his control.

"I see," Xander said with a slow nod. "Well, I hope the best for you. Say, how about this. Release us, we will go on our way, and you will never see us again."

The Shiplacks looked at one another and laughed before Shiplack advanced upon him. "I think not."

Xander looked down the barrel of the pistol, trying desperately to determine just how he was going to find his way out of this mess. The one thing he knew for certain was that if he ever did so, the only thing he needed once he left was Juliet.

"One last question for you."

"Very well."

"Where are the jewels now?" Xander asked, tilting his head as though he was simply curious in the answer.

"What do you mean?"

“Do you even know where they are? Or has the baron hidden them on you? Do you really think he will share them with you?”

“Of course I know where they are,” Shiplack said indignantly. “I took them from you myself. I haven’t even told Wilington yet. They’re hidden in this very cottage, on the other side of the wall, underneath the bed. Once we do away with you, we will inform the baron that we have found them and are ready to leave.”

“Does Wilington even know they are here?” Xander asked, wondering if there was any chance he could divide loyalties. It seemed the only possibility out. Perhaps Arie or Damien were having better luck with their ropes.

“Not yet. He was going to collect them himself, but then I happened upon you.”

“Ah, when you were going to come steal them for yourself,” Xander said, beginning to see the entire plot. Wilington and Shiplack were working together, yet he had the feeling that each of them had been planning to double-cross the other. “How interesting, then, that you don’t believe he would ever do the same to you.”

“That’s enough talking,” Mrs. Shiplack said, walking forward and taking the gun from her husband. “If you can’t shoot them, Stanley, then I shall do it myself.”

“Before we begin shooting, perhaps we best discuss why I have an empty closet.”

They all stopped at the voice that filled the doorway. The baron began to walk into the room. His steps were slow and his eyes were cloudy, but he still seemed to understand just what was happening in front of him. Xander tried not to react when he saw that Juliet followed behind him, even as he wished that she was as far from here as possible. This was no place for her, and he could only hope that she would stay out of the way, or, better yet, find a way to escape.

But of course, Juliet chose instead to put herself in the midst of the danger.

“Mrs. Shiplack,” she said with surprise in her voice. “What are you doing here? Are you well? I thought you had to return home.”

“Don’t believe everything you see, princess,” Mrs. Shiplack said, her lips curling into a smile before she turned to her husband. “Let’s finish this business so we can leave here with the jewels.”

“Speaking of,” the baron said, his lips peeling back away from

his teeth, “where are they?”

“They tried to steal it all,” Shiplack said, pointing to Xander and Damien. “We found them, hit them over the head, and brought them down here.”

“Well done,” the baron said, and Xander cringed. He was hoping to grow distrust between the two of them, not strengthen it. “And where are the jewels now?”

“They are well hidden,” Shiplack said with obvious attempted nonchalance, and Xander’s optimism increased a notch. Perhaps Shiplack’s trust had ebbed after all.

“Where are they, Shiplack?” Wilington growled, his patience going the way of Shiplack’s trust. As they argued, Xander noted Juliet begin to circle around the room, away from the baron. He tried to shake his head at her, to motion at her to leave, but she was no longer paying him any attention.

“Before we decide that,” Shiplack said, “I think we best come to an agreement on just what I am to receive from their sale.”

“We already did that.”

“It’s not enough. Not after everything I’ve done.”

“They are *my* jewels!” The baron was sputtering now, and Xander was concerned that the man was going to drop to the ground. Somehow he didn’t think this is what the physician had in mind when he’d told him to rest. “And your buyer,” he pointed at Arie in disgust, “is nothing! No one!”

Juliet had completely disappeared now, the others in the room too distracted to notice that she had left. Xander prayed that she was escaping, finding a door and getting herself away from here. If nothing else, he would try to give her, as well as Annabelle, time to leave.

“They may be your jewels, but you wouldn’t have bought them at such a low price if not for me. And while this buyer may not have worked out,” he waved toward Arie, “I will find you another who will. I deserve a much higher percentage.”

Wilington walked over to Shiplack, pointing a finger in his face. “You ungrateful son-of-a-bitch.”

Mrs. Shiplack lifted the pistol, pointing it now toward the baron instead of Xander, which was far preferable.

“Take that back,” she ordered.

“Oh, and what are *you* going to do?” Wilington asked, his ignorance about the intelligence and cunning of women blinding

him to what Mrs. Shiplack was capable of. “You are not going to shoot me. You do not know how.”

“That,” she said, pulling back the hammer, her eyes narrowing, “is where you are wrong.”

There was a deafening boom in the air, gun powder flying everywhere after Mrs. Shiplack pulled the trigger. Xander cringed, waiting for the smoke to clear, and for Mrs. Shiplack to turn on him.

“Enough of all of this,” she snapped now, showing no remorse at what she had just done to the baron, who was now lying prone on the ground. “Stanley, collect the jewels. I’ll take care of these three as you obviously don’t have it in you.”

Shiplack began to back out of the room, clearly as afraid of his wife as the rest of them, while Xander exchanged a horrified glance with Arie. His brother always had everything, every eventuality, so carefully planned. To see such stark terror on his face told him one thing — Arie had no plan. And there was obviously no reasoning with Mrs. Shiplack. They were without options.

Mrs. Shiplack turned toward him, apparently deciding that he would be first to go. She narrowed her eyes again, bringing him into her sights, and Xander said a prayer for his soul, ending with the hopes that the Lord would watch over Juliet and ensure she had a good life.

Then the gunshot sounded and he could see and hear no more.

# Chapter 21

Juliet took a breath. And then another. She began to lower the gun, which was shaking in her trembling fingers, before she hesitantly crossed the room, scared of what she was going to find.

While perusing the cottage she had found a back room, and in one of the bags packed to leave, a pistol. She had learned to shoot a gun many years ago — and it wasn't the first time she had aimed one at a person.

But she had never shot to kill. And while she knew how to use a pistol, it was not as though her aim was particularly true. She could have just as easily killed Xander as Mrs. Shiplack, and she had no idea how she would ever live with herself if she had.

Just as she took a step closer toward the bodies and the chairs, footsteps sounded behind her, and she whirled around, lifting the weapon as Shiplack re-entered the room, his eyes widening when he saw Juliet standing with the gun.

"It wasn't your wife who fired the shot," she said, shocked at how even her voice was. "I suggest you put down that bag."

Shiplack did as he was told, his mouth opening and closing but no sound emerging. Juliet still couldn't see what was within the room, as the light outside was dimming and the smoke too thick in the air. The only one she could see was Arie, so with the gun trained on Shiplack, she crossed to him and began to work at the knots that bound him to the chair. She wasn't particularly successful one-handed, however, and she nearly cried out in relief when Annabelle ran through the door of the cottage.

"Juliet!" she said, her hands on her knees as she had apparently expended a great deal of energy in getting here. "I have to tell you —"

She stopped abruptly when she took a moment to see all that was before her, but Juliet had no time for explanations.

"Untie Arie," she said, and Annabelle nodded and got to work as Juliet kept the gun on Shiplack, even while she heard a moan from the middle of the room. Her heart beat more rapidly than it was likely ever supposed to as she wondered who was lying injured, but

there was nothing she could do until she had more help. After what seemed like hours instead of seconds, Arie was free, and he walked over to her, taking the pistol from her, having to slowly remove each of her fingers which she hadn't realized had been gripping it in a vise.

"I'll take that," he said, more gently than she knew he was capable of.

The moment he had it, she forgot everything else as she flew across the room toward Xander. The smoke had begun to clear, although they were losing light as time ticked by.

"Xander," she cried out, crossing to where he remained slouched in his chair. Her actions were panicky as she began to pull at his bindings, and soon Annabelle was beside her, helping her, her motions much calmer than Juliet's. Once they had Xander free of his bindings, she caught him in her arms, seeing a red trickle of blood at his forehead that caused her to panic, until she heard his name being screamed aloud — before realizing that it was coming from her.

As she laid him on the floor next to a moaning Mrs. Shiplack, she saw all her worst fears coming true — she had shot him. He was dead because of her, and she would never be able to forgive herself. Suddenly, a wave of understanding overcame her, as she realized — now far too late — why he had left her in the first place. When it was she who had been shot, when the bullet had gone through her leg, Xander had been beside himself. And now she knew what it felt like.

He had left because he was terrified of it ever happening again, of ever having to re-live that panic and that fear, that thought that she might be gone forever.

But it had happened to him instead.

As she lay there, the lapels of his jacket clutched between her fingers, she was oblivious to anything around her, for her grief was choking her, blinding her, making her unable to see or hear anything else in the room.

Finally, Annabelle shook her shoulders so hard that Xander's jacket slipped out of her fingers, and Juliet was jolted back to the moment.

"Juliet!" Annabelle shouted in her face now. "Listen to me. Xander is alive."

"Wh-what?" she asked, wondering if she had truly heard what



Annabelle had said, or if she was only hearing what she wanted to hear.

“I said he is alive. He is breathing. It looks like a bullet flew past his head, but it only grazed him. He will be fine.”

Juliet placed a hand on her chest as she tried to bring the air in, realizing she had barely been breathing herself.

“Why isn’t he responding?”

“Give him a minute,” Damien crouched beside her now, someone — Annabelle or Arie — having untied his bonds. “He was hit in the head in the closet and now struck, though lightly, by a bullet. He’s a tough son-of-a-bitch, though, so he should be fine in a moment or two. He’s got a thick head.”

Juliet looked up, seeing that Shiplack was sitting in the corner, his head in his hands as he seemed to be in a daze, while Arie and Annabelle were looking over Mrs. Shiplack and Lord Wilington.

She opened her mouth to ask about their current condition when Xander twitched beneath her.

“Xander?” she said, her hands coming to his face. “Xander?”

“Juliet,” he murmured, lifting one hand and touching her cheek before dropping it again. She and Damien helped him sit up, and then Damien moved him over so that he was leaning against the sofa.

Once Xander’s eyes opened and stayed that way, Damien backed away, leaving them alone.

“Oh, Xander,” Juliet said, sinking in front of him, taking his face in her hands, unable to stop the flow of tears, tears that had remained within until now, when they began to flow along with her relief. “I thought you were dead.”

“Never,” he said with his cheeky grin. “I could never leave you like that, you know.”

“You were going to,” she said, her eyes narrowing at him, even though she would forgive him for anything in this moment. “You were going to take everything and leave me again. Well, guess what, Xander Murphy! I am not going to let you.”

While his smile seemed pained, it still warmed her right through as he pulled her close, snuggling her between his legs, her own bent around him.

“I have news for you, Juliet Simpson,” he said, touching his nose to hers. “I had no plans to go anywhere without you.”

“But I heard you,” she insisted. “Through the door. Not that it

matters, for it's all done now, and what's important is that you are alive, and you are well, and we are—"

"I was only saying that so that Arie wouldn't try to push us apart or exclude you from the haul once more," he said, running the fingers of one hand through the strands that had loosened from what had one time been her artfully arranged hair. "I never meant any of it. All I ever wanted — all I want now — is to leave here with you. For the two of us to be together. I don't give a damn who has the jewels or what becomes of them. As long as we're together, we'll figure it out. I was a fool to leave you years ago," he murmured, continuing to stroke her hair. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forever," she said, her words coming out as a whisper while her lip trembled, even as she fought for control. "I understand what you were trying to do. I do. But a life without you is no life at all."

He nodded and then pulled her even closer toward him, crushing her in his embrace, before he kissed her on the top of her head, her forehead, her cheeks, her tear-filled eyes, the tip of her nose, before coming to her mouth. That, he took much more forcefully, kissing her so hard, with such passion, that she feared he was going to collapse on her again.

Finally she gently pushed him back away, tilting her head to the side so that she could assess his wound.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"No," he said, blinking a few times. "But I know I'll be fine."

"If you two are finished over there," Arie's voice cut in, "we best get back to the house and call the physician."

"Are they dead?" Juliet asked, as Damien crossed to them and helped Xander rise. Xander placed one arm over Damien's shoulder, the other over Juliet's, as they walked to the door.

"Mrs. Shiplack's shot went wide, but it seems the baron has suffered another attack from within. His heart, if I had to guess," Damien said. "You hit Mrs. Shiplack in the shoulder, Juliet, but my guess is that she'll live."

Juliet registered the information, finding she didn't really care, although she supposed she was glad she wasn't a murderess.

"Where's Annabelle?" Juliet looked around.

"She took off to hide the jewels in the carriage, although she still doesn't seem to particularly trust me," Arie said with a grin. "I wouldn't blame her."

Arie hefted the baron over his shoulder, telling Shiplack to lift his wife, and the entire party followed the passageway back into the house and up to the baron's room. Arie placed Wilington on the bed and began to call for the butler, just as the door opened, revealing the valet, as well as two strange men behind him.

"You!" Arie exclaimed, pointing a finger toward him as he crossed the room. "You are part of this. You—"

He stopped when the valet lifted a gun, pointing it at Arie. "Enough. Sit. All of you. Except you," he said, motioning to Shiplack. "One of my men will accompany you to your bedroom so that you may put her down."

"Your men?" Juliet repeated in confusion before the valet put away his gun.

"I am not the valet," he said, crossing his hands in front of him. "I am from London. A detective from Bow Street, actually."

"You're what?" Xander said, and Juliet knew he was likely berating himself for not realizing it sooner.

"We were apprised that the baron and his associate were using a scheme to rip off sellers and then the private buyers. We decided that I would follow him to his estate and pose as his valet in order to gain his trust."

"But—"

"My name is Fred Grant," he said with a nod as two other men joined him. "This is Marshall."

The other men nodded, looking at them all suspiciously.

"Thank you for helping us capture the Shiplacks," he continued. "We've been watching the wife for some time. She has been married five times and we believe she usually kills the husband, but this time she used him to get to the baron."

"Of course," Arie said thoughtfully. "Now, if that will be all, we will take our leave. We are—"

Grant held up a hand. "Before you go, we will take the jewels."

"We know nothing of them," Arie said, lifting his hands. "We wish you the best of luck searching for them."

"Ah, but you have not met my other associate."

The third man came in, with a very dejected Annabelle. "He intercepted this woman, and wouldn't you know, she had all of the jewels with her. Thank you for your service."

He smiled at them all, while Juliet could feel the tension that hung in the air among the rest of them.

“Now, I think we are all aware that you each had much more to do with this than stand by and watch it happen. However, since we have recovered everything, we will allow you to be on your way. But please, do not come to our attention again or the result will be much different. Do you understand?”

“We do,” Juliet said quickly. “Thank you, Constable.”

They left as quickly as possible before the detectives changed their minds.

## Chapter 22

“Well. This is certainly a surprise.”

Xander tried to give his sister a look of warning. But Diana simply raised her eyebrows and sipped her tea as she stared at the group that sat around Arie’s drawing room, trying to make sense of everything that had occurred.

Arie kept an assessing gaze on Xander and Juliet, but Xander was not letting her go again — not now, nor ever. He kept a firm grip on her hand, pleased that she showed no sign of pulling it away.

It filled him with confidence — knowing that, no matter what, they were in this together.

Although that didn’t lessen his worry when he looked at Arie.

He sat on what the rest of them jokily called his throne, albeit a joke he didn’t take to with much enthusiasm. The Louis XV chair with its off-white hide was where he always sat in these family meetings, and seemed to help accentuate the power he already felt.

“Well. That didn’t entirely go as planned.”

He looked over the rest of them before explaining in general terms just what had happened for Diana’s benefit. Xander looked over to the corner of the sofa where Calli usually sat, missing his sister but knowing that it was best she not attend such meetings — they would see her for more social visits.

“So you came away with nothing?” Diana asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Nothing,” Arie grumbled. “Gave it all away like a bunch of chuckled-headed geese.”

Juliet looked up at Xander, and he shrugged. Whether or not she wanted to share what she came away with was her decision. He was not going to force it on her.

“Actually,” she said carefully, “we do not have *nothing*.”

Xander leaned down to whisper in her ear, even as he saw Annabelle’s startled and warning gaze from across the room.

“What do you mean?” Arie asked, leaning forward, his interest apparent.

"I *mean* that there might be... something."

"The jewels you stole." Arie's eyes gleamed now. "You somehow managed to collect them before we left."

"We did," Juliet confirmed, nodding but toward Annabelle, as they silently made some sort of agreement. "And we will share some of them with you — just as you were so *generously* going to share some with us."

Xander couldn't help his snicker as Juliet seemed to get the best of his brother. Arie's gaze darkened.

"Continue," he said, his voice smoky with warning.

"Before I tell you where they are," she said, her smile serene although Xander knew there was far more going on behind it, "you must agree to something."

"Very well."

"Annabelle must get her fair share. She keeps half."

Arie didn't respond for a moment, surprising Xander, who nearly choked at her words himself.

Instead, Arie's lips stretched into a slow, smug grin, before he burst out laughing.

"Do you seriously think I would agree to such a thing?"

"You have no choice."

"Don't I?"

"You do not. For you don't know where the jewels are."

Arie crossed his hands over one another. "Are you telling me they are not in the floor of my carriage?"

"No," Juliet confirmed with a smug smile of her own. "We managed to hide them elsewhere. Somewhere you will only find out about through me."

Arie grunted, his annoyance at having been deceived by Juliet rather obvious.

"Arie," she said, much softer now, and Xander was curious at just how she was going to approach this. As for his own thoughts on the subject, he didn't much care. Juliet was here with him, and that's all that mattered. "I know we all had plans for those jewels. We all made promises. But Annabelle worked tirelessly on fabricating beautiful jewellery to replace the baron's collection. I talked her into this, promising her half of what we walked away with, and that's what I'm going to ensure she receives."

"And what about the man *I* made a promise to?" Arie asked, leaning forward, interlocking his fingers. "Does that not matter?"

"Of course it does," Juliet responded. "That's why you can use what we make from our portion to pay him back first."

"And all that we have worked so hard for?" Arie asked, widening his arms to the side. "What about that?"

"Sometimes things work out," Juliet said simply. "Sometimes they don't. None of us walked away with what we went there for, it's true. But didn't we discover something much better? Xander and I found one another again. And if I am going to be with him, that means that I will not only spend my life with him, but with all of you. I have found my family again. Years ago, you told me that Xander was better off without me, that I was a means to an end. But I am wiser now and I know that could never be true. For he and I only make one another better."

Her voice nearly broke at the end, and Xander stretched his arm around her waist, squeezing her close, as she looked up at Arie, ready to support Juliet in whatever she proposed.

"She's right, Arie," he said. "You know that if you ever say such a thing to her again, if you ever try to make me choose again, I will choose her. So don't even ask. As for the jewels, there's nothing else we can do. Besides, we can find a way forward to support ourselves. Annabelle is on her own. She left her employ to help Juliet. As a woman living alone, she has to find a way to support herself."

Arie sighed, sitting back in his chair as he rubbed his forehead. Xander knew exactly what was going through his mind. Arie made careful plans, and he saw them through to completion. Anything that was less than what he set out to do, he considered a failure. Not only that, but this was the second plan recently that had gone awry. The first he blamed Calli for, now the second Xander.

But Xander wouldn't change anything. Not even for Arie's approval.

"Listen, Arie," he continued, "I would like nothing more than to remain a member of this family in every way possible. But if you don't want me here anymore, I understand. Juliet and I can make our lives elsewhere."

Damien stood abruptly, and Diana opened her mouth as though she had something to say, but Arie silenced them all by lifting his hand.

"Enough of that nonsense."

"I just—"

"I don't want to hear it," Arie said, his words harsh. "Yes, the

plan went wrong, and I would have preferred to walk away with *all* of the jewels. That didn't happen. But that doesn't change who we are or what we mean to one another. Do you understand me?"

Arie was so serious that Xander had to work hard to hide the smile that threatened to emerge, knowing that Arie wouldn't appreciate it. But he couldn't help it. He too enjoyed seeing Arie like this, in a rare moment when he acknowledged how much they all meant to one another.

"Very well, Arie, if you say so," he said, standing, holding out a hand to Juliet. "If that is all, we are going to retire for the night. It's been a long day."

When Juliet looked up and met his gaze, her eyes were hot, her lids heavy with desire, and Xander had to keep himself from picking her up and running with her up the stairs.

"Stop."

Xander couldn't help his audible sigh in exasperation, but he turned anyway to see what Arie wanted.

"Juliet," Arie said, obviously struggling with the words. "Before you go, I—I must apologize. For what I said. Five years ago. I was wrong, and you are always welcome here."

Juliet blinked a few times, obviously as stunned as the rest of them.

"Th-thank you, Arie," she said, taking Xander's hand to rise. She looked away from him, clearing her throat before addressing Diana. "Is there a room for Annabelle for the night?"

"I've already had Calli's old room made up. I assume you already have decided on your... accommodations," Diana said, her usual stoic expression somewhat impish as she looked on at them, and Xander nearly rolled his eyes at his family's obviousness.

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Of course," Diana said, following them out, but before Xander could hurry Juliet away and up the stairs, Diana placed a hand on Juliet's arm, stalling them. Xander groaned in frustration.

"I know you want to go, and I understand, but I just wanted to say..." she twisted her fingers together. "I know Arie hasn't made this particularly easy on either of you, but the truth is, I always thought you were better off together and I was sorry it didn't work out in the past. I hope this time is different."

Xander nodded at his sister, appreciating the sentiment, even if it was somewhat ill timing.



“Thank you, Diana.”

She nodded and turned to go, and the moment her back was facing them, Xander did what he had been longing to do since they walked through the door, and picked up Juliet and raced her up the stairs.

She threw back her head and laughed in abandon as he did so, and he couldn't remember the last time he had felt so complete, nor been so sure that his life was moving in the right direction.

He had always lived for his family, but he couldn't remember the last time he had done something for himself, or had made a decision that hadn't been dictated by Arie.

He didn't care what Arie thought anymore. Juliet was his. And he was going to make sure it stayed that way.

# Chapter 23

Juliet held on tight as Xander hurried her up the stairs, her heart beating in time with his footsteps. She wasn't sure what the future had in store for the two of them, but there was one thing she did know — whatever came, they would embrace it together.

"You don't have to carry me," she said, nearly breathless even though it was Xander who was exerting himself.

"I know," he said with his usual grin, "but I was worried that you might not remember the way."

"I would always know the way to you," she said, dipping her head, not wanting him to see such a moment of vulnerability, but there was no hiding from him and he seemed to appreciate it.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said, nudging open the door of his bedroom with his hip before placing her on her feet before him. Instead of standing with her, however, he knelt down in front of her, taking her hands in his. "Juliet. We've been through so much together."

Her eyes widened as she realized what he was doing, but she simply agreed, "we have," before allowing him to continue. She assumed he had spent some time on this speech, and she wanted to enjoy every minute of it.

"When we were together... before... we were young. I was stupid. You weren't. You were never stupid. But I made a lot of mistakes. The biggest one, of course, was leaving you."

"You can stand if that's more comfortable," she said, and he nodded, getting to his feet before drawing her over to the bed, sitting her down upon it while he took her hands in his and held them in his lap.

"Thanks," he said, grinning sheepishly. "It didn't take quite so long when I said it in my head." He cleared his throat and continued. "I thought I was doing the right thing, I really did."

On that, Juliet couldn't help but interrupt him. "I know, Xander, I do. You don't have to apologize anymore, really. I understand."

"I still have to say it," he insisted. "I thought I was doing it out of love. I thought you would be better off without me. But I should

have chosen instead to leave the life and go with you. Because life without you... well it was not anywhere near as beautiful as it was with you. I didn't realize how much you were a part of me, how much I needed you. Loving you was not something that I could turn on or off. It was not a decision I could make. It was — it *is* — as natural as breathing.”

Juliet's own breath caught in her throat at his declaration. She understood — oh, did she understand — and yet, she had never thought Xander would be able to put it so eloquently into words.

“I feel the same,” she said, squeezing his hands, loving everything he was saying and yet also wanting to know what the end result of this speech was going to be.

“When I saw you again, I realized just how much I missed you, how much I needed you, how important it was that I never let you go again. I was a fool, Juliet, but at least I have learned from my mistake.”

He slid from the bed to both knees now, kneeling between her legs, looking up at her earnestly with her hands still clasped within his.

“You are the perfect woman.”

“Oh, Xander, I am anything but perfect,” she protested, unable to help herself, but he shook his head.

“Very well. You are the perfect woman for *me*. You are courageous and headstrong, loyal and determined, and you care for people more deeply than I could ever imagine. What you did for Annabelle, the fact that you are willing to forgive Arie for everything he has ever done or said to you — it says so much about who you are, Juliet. And I love you for it. I love everything about you.”

He inched ever closer to her now, wrapping his arms around her hips, interlacing them behind her.

“I cannot imagine the rest of my life without you. Will you be my wife? I promise I will never leave you. I promise I will be true to you, and choose you above all others. I love you with every part of my being, and I will spend the rest of my days making you happy, if you will only say yes.”

Juliet's eyes were so covered in tears that his visage had become quite blurred below, but it didn't matter, for she would always find him — no matter what. She leaned down and took his cheeks between her hands.

“I love you too, Xander,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. “And yes, of course I will marry you. You are mine as I am yours. I welcome all of the other people who will enrich our lives along the way, but you — I cannot live without you. I tried, and it didn’t turn out very well.”

Xander let out a whoop of glee as, in one motion, he stood and lifted her up in his arms, turning around and around, swirling her in the air until they both fell upon the bed in such a tangle of limbs that it was hard to know where one of them began and the other one ended.

Which, Juliet felt, represented how the two of them, their hearts and souls, were intertwined. They had always been so, but they had allowed others to convince them they were better off apart. While Juliet would never want to relive her experience at the baron’s again, she would do so if it meant bringing her back to Xander. She was just grateful that they had found one another once more, and she would never lose sight of what was important.

Xander’s lips found hers, and there was no soft teasing or tasting, but rather an onslaught of all the emotion within him as his lips pressed against hers with a hunger that Juliet felt in equal measure. She kissed him back fiercely, hardly able to believe the ferocity of her need for him, as he completed her in every way possible.

She loved him more than words could say, which was why she was so grateful that if she couldn’t tell him, she could show him — and he seemed more than eager to do the same.

Juliet couldn’t have said how they lost their clothing, but soon enough it was in a pile on the floor next to them, and she was laid out on the bed before him as he stared down at her, looking at her as though he was feasting his eyes on the crystal necklace itself.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, tilting her head at the seriousness that had overtaken his usually affable face. “It’s not as though you have never seen me naked before.”

“No,” he said, smoothing a hand down her face, her neck, then along the side of her body, leaving tingles in his wake. “But I’ve never seen you like this with the knowledge that I will always be able to do so — that I won’t have another day in which I will be wondering where you are, if you are all right, if you miss me in the same way that I long for you.”

Juliet could feel the tears now sliding down her face as she

stared at the planes of his, replete in the knowledge and the trust they now shared. She could hardly believe that she had so adamantly denied him, had convinced herself that she didn't need him, that she would be fine without him. How wrong she had been.

"Never," she swore vehemently, and with that he let out a growl of need and descended upon her, his lips taking hers as his hands seemed to be everywhere at once.

"Xander," she gasped as he left her mouth and began kissing his way down her body, finding all of the places that became sensitive at his touch — the side of her neck, the groove of her hip, the soft skin behind her knee. "I need you."

"I know. I need you too."

She reached down and grabbed his face, bringing him up to see her.

"But right now — I *need* you."

His eyes turned dark as understanding dawned, and he grinned at her wolfishly. "Oh do you now?"

She nodded, her throat thick with desire.

"Let me check," he said, and she groaned when his hands found her, working into her so slowly that she thrust up to meet him, demanding more.

"Xander!" she gasped. "Not like this. I need *you*."

"Oh, very well," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "If you insist."

He withdrew his fingers, but before she could bemoan the loss of them, he swiftly plunged into her, stretching her, filling her so completely that she cried out at the wondrous sensation of it.

She met his gaze, which was no longer teasing but hungry, the tight, toned muscles of his chest and neck straining as he held himself just above her while he thrust into her over and over, as she met him each time, her arms coming up to hold tight to his biceps.

He was hers. And would be for the rest of their lives. It was near impossible to believe, after everything they had been through.

He seemed to be thinking the same as she was, for he leaned down and took her lips with his, as passionately as he took her body. They were fused together in every way, and it was that very thought that threw Juliet over the edge, as there was no slow build up but rather an explosion as she came around him, which sent him right along with her.

Juliet didn't know how long they stayed in the same position,

unmoving, both astonished at the depths of what had just occurred between them, until Xander finally lowered himself down, framing her face between his arms before he turned over onto his side and lay there, gently stroking the hair away from her face as he studied her.

“How soon would you like to be married?” he murmured, and she smiled at the question.

“I suppose it doesn’t overly matter, for not much will change once we are wed, will it?” she scrunched up her nose, thinking on it.

“Of course it will!” he surprised her by exclaiming with much passion, lifting himself up on an elbow as he stared down at her. “Everything will change. We will be tied together — for life.”

Juliet tried not to smile at just how much it meant to him, but it did fill her with an unimaginable warmth. “I know, and I agree. I just meant... I suppose I will be living here with you now, even before we are married? We are promised to one another.”

“We are,” he said, lowering himself back down again, “and I have to tell you, that in every way besides in the church’s eyes, I am married to you. But I still long to see you share my name, to hear your vows in front of God and all those who love us.”

“Then I suggest we get married as soon as possible.”

“I will contact the vicar about the banns tomorrow,” he said, settling himself back down on the pillow.

“What do you suppose Arie will think about all of this?” she asked hesitantly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Xander said vehemently, as she knew he would. “We will be married regardless.”

“Yes,” she said carefully, appreciating what he was saying and yet knowing that there was more to it. “But I know how much it would mean to you to have his blessing. And the truth is, it means much to me as well. He is your family, Xander, and no matter what, you will always have a hole in your life if he isn’t there.”

Xander sighed and threw an arm up over his face.

“I suppose you’re right. You usually are. But if he has anything to say to the contrary, then it is his loss.”

“Very well.”

“Calli is going to be shocked once I talk to her.”

Juliet smiled. “I can hardly wait to see her again.”

Xander nodded, before he became somewhat contemplative.

“What are we going to do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“With our lives,” he said. “I don’t know that I want to keep up this business for the rest of my years. It’s a young man’s game, and I don’t know that either of us want to continue to worry about what’s going to become of the other.”

“No,” Juliet said slowly, “You’re right about that. Though after this long, it’s hard to imagine living a life on the straight and narrow.”

“And then there’s children to consider.”

Juliet placed a hand on her stomach, smiling at the thought. “There is.” She thought for a moment. “What about this. Perhaps we try to find a way forward, to build a life without the constant danger. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t help your family when required. What do you think?”

“I think... that sounds like a fine idea,” Xander said before leaning down and kissing her again. “Now, I think we’ve done enough talking for one night.”

Juliet let out a little squeal as he wrapped his arms around her and began to show her once more just how much he was done with the discussion.



\* \* \*

Xander was pleasantly surprised to find that Arie, in fact, did not need much convincing.

“So,” Arie said as they sat down together at the breakfast table the next morning. Unlike what they had witnessed in the baron’s household, the family here took the meal together, not whenever each of them felt like rising, “when are you going to be married?”

Xander and Juliet exchanged a look of surprise. “Ah... as soon as the banns are read, I suppose,” Xander said, overcome by Arie’s apparent change in attitude. “How did you know?”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Arie said in annoyance. “I am aware that the two of you are determined to be together, and I am

not about to stand in your way. You might as well be married.”

“Thank you, Arie,” Juliet murmured, but Xander considered him for another minute.

“Not that you would stand between us anyway — would you?” he said, arching an eyebrow, and Arie took another bite of eggs before he answered them, staring at them without expression.

“No, I don’t suppose I would. Not anymore,” he said, and Xander nearly chuckled. Apparently, that was all they were going to get out of Arie. But it would have to be enough. “Besides,” Arie continued, “I wouldn’t want anyone living in sin under my roof.”

Damien nearly choked on the piece of bread he was stuffing into his mouth at that, and Xander pounded him on the back to help him get it out as the door opened and they looked up to find Calli walking through the door, alone but for her growing stomach.

“It seems I have interrupted something,” she said, before her eyes alighted on Xander and the woman beside him. “Juliet!”

She rushed around the table as quickly as was possible given her condition and reached down, wrapping her arms around her. “Oh, goodness, it has been far too long. I’ve missed you. As has Xander, although I do hope he has told you that already. What are you doing here? Did you finally decide to forgive my foolish brother? Oh, Xander, Damien, what happened with the jewels at the old baron’s house?”

She seemed to realize herself that there was no possible way they could keep up with her questions, for she laughed and clapped her hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry. I just... it’s all quite surprising. Perhaps begin by telling me how you came to find one another again.”

She pulled out the remaining empty chair from around the long table, settling in for the story as she filled her plate.

Juliet looked to Xander, and between the two of them they began to share all — well, nearly all — that had happened since they both found themselves seeking out the baron’s jewels. Calli’s eyes were wide by the end of their tale, which took until she finished her breakfast.

“That is utterly romantic,” she said with a smile as she placed her hand on Juliet’s arm. “And now?”

“Now we are going to be married,” Xander said with a wide grin.

“Oh!” Calli exclaimed, clasping her hands together, “how soon?”



“A few weeks after the banns are read, I suppose,” Xander said, leaning back in his chair.

“Oh, good,” Calli said. “Before the Season is finished, then, which means we will all still be here in London. How perfect. Now, if there is anything you need...”

As his sister continued talking to Juliet, now basically ignoring him, Xander sat back and took it all in. His family. The love of his life. All here together. He didn't think he could ever be happier, nor had he ever expected anything like this to come to pass. Now he just had to decide what the future might hold.

# Epilogue

Juliet looked around the small shop. She wanted to make sure everything was just right.

She began one last walk around the room, running her hands over the top of the glass of the display cases, inspecting each and every jewel to ensure it was perfect.

Her heart fluttered as she hoped beyond all reason that this would work, that they would find success, that people would trust a trio of jewel thieves.

But then, most who frequented the store would have no idea who they really were.

“Ready?” The smile was already on Juliet’s face just at his voice, and she turned as Xander walked into the showroom from the back, wrapping his arm around her waist and squeezing her tightly into his side.

“Where’s Annabelle?”

“Hiding,” Xander said with a laugh. “She said she’s too nervous to come out. She doesn’t want to see the expression on people’s faces when they look at her work.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Juliet exclaimed. “The only expressions they will be wearing are those of pure awe at the work of the finest jeweller in London.”

“I agree with you,” Xander said with a shrug. “But try telling her that.”

“Not to worry, I will,” Juliet said sternly.

“But first,” Xander said, holding up a finger, “it’s one o’clock. Which means—”

“It’s time.”

Juliet let out the breath she had been holding. “Are you going to open the door?”

“I think you should do it.”

“But—”

“This is all because of you,” Xander said. “You know that I would have worked to support you had that been what you wanted. But you told me, idle hands and all that, so here we are. Now that I

see it — and see you — I know this is what you were meant to do.”

“What *we* were meant to do.”

“Exactly. I still think you should open the door.”

Juliet nodded and then walked over and unlocked the door, before flipping the sign in the window to “Open.” Before she could return to Xander, the door creaked open, revealing a horde of people waiting to enter. People Juliet recognized.

“You came!” Xander said, walking forward and shaking the hands of his brothers, sisters, and brother-in-law.

“Of course we came,” Calli said, holding the hand of Mary, one of the two children she had taken on like her own when she had married the duke.

Juliet immediately sank into a curtsy at the appearance of said duke, who she had only met briefly at their wedding. “Your Grace, thank you so much for coming.”

“I could never miss seeing Xander enter into a legitimate business,” said the duke, who’s face remained stoic, although Juliet didn’t miss the twinkle in his eye when he regarded his brother-in-law. She had been astonished when Xander revealed that he and his brother-in-law had developed quite an amiable relationship. From what she could tell, they were as different as two men could be — but they both loved Calli, which is what mattered most, she had come to realize. “As to where the money came from to back this business, I would rather not know,” he finished grimly, and Juliet had to keep from laughing as Arie snorted behind him.

As the duke moved on to take a better look at the holdings within the display cases, Damien and Diana congratulated them next, even Diana seeming approve at the shop and its offerings. Juliet, Xander, and Annabelle had worked very hard with every little detail over the past three months, and Juliet herself had been astonished at the outcome.

Finally Arie approached, his gait measured, his expression contemplative.

“You’ve done well,” he said approvingly, and Xander nodded his thanks, although Juliet knew that he no longer sought Arie’s approval as much as he once did.

“Thank you, Arie,” Juliet said, dipping her head. “And thank you for giving us the money to begin.”

“It was yours,” he said. “I just recovered it for you. You’ve invested the rest of it wisely.”

Both Juliet and Xander had been astonished when Arie had suggested that they use the money left over from the stolen jewellery to start a new life for themselves. Then he had produced something else — the news that he had found her former friend, Mary. She had died shortly after she had left Juliet, and while she had accessed some of Xander's savings, there was more than enough left for Juliet and Xander to start a new life for themselves. They could hardly believe it, and had suggested that they share it with the family to make up for the loss of half of the jewels, but Arie wouldn't accept the gesture. And once Arie set his mind on something, there was no changing it.

Except in the matter of a certain relationship.

"I know you'll do well for yourselves," he said with a nod. "And I do appreciate the offer to assist when needed. In fact, there might be a... situation I could use your help with next month. But today is not the day for such discussions. Today is a day to celebrate how far you have come with this venture."

He was about to walk away, but stopped, lifting a finger. "If you are ever in the need for additional items to sell, I might be of service."

"Thank you, Arie," Xander said with a tilt in his head, "but I think we will keep this business legitimate."

"I never indicated that my items would be anything otherwise," he said as he drifted away, and Juliet and Xander exchanged a look; Juliet rolling her eyes while Xander smirked.

The door creaked, and new customers arrived, this time people Juliet had never seen before. She walked over to greet them as Xander slid behind the counter to help anyone who might request it. Juliet noticed that even Annabelle peeked her head out from behind the curtain, and after awhile, when visitors began to come and go, remarking on the beauty of her designs — some purchasing, others promising to return — the hesitancy on her face began to flee, to be replaced by a look of wonder.

Later that afternoon, after the first crowd began to ebb, the door opened and in walked two couples, both dressed rather finely, although that was a given in this neighbourhood.

The one man seemed oddly familiar, although Juliet couldn't entirely place him. On his arm was a slight blond woman, although her eyes didn't seem to miss anything as she looked around the room. The other man held himself decidedly noble, his blond hair

slightly long, the woman at his side nearly as tall as he, her hair dark and her eyes assessing.

“Welcome,” Juliet said with a smile. “May we help you with anything?”

The first man turned his sharp gaze toward her, and Juliet’s eyes widened as she realized exactly where she knew him from. She turned around to look at Xander with some panic, but the man held up a hand before she could say anything.

“We are here to browse, Miss Simpson,” he said, “not to arrest you. I promised you that would never happen. Besides, from everything we have been able to determine, there is nothing about this shop that is suspicious.”

The other woman asked to see one of the pieces behind the counter, which Xander agreed to warily before holding it up to her. Instead of trying it on or gushing over it like most women, she narrowed her eyes, pulling out a magnifying glass to inspect it.

“Old habits are difficult to be rid of,” the other man said with a shrug and an affectionate smile, and Juliet’s heart pounded. They were doing nothing wrong here — not this time — but it seemed there was at least one constable here in her store, who must be determined to prove her guilt.

Before she could protest, however, the woman straightened, then turned to the man who had eyes only for her instead of the jewel in her hand. “It’s a beautiful piece,” she said, “and quite real. Any woman would be lucky to have it.”

“And that woman shall be you,” the man said, even as she began to shake her head.

“Oh, I couldn’t—”

“Georgie,” he admonished, “you must remember that you are more worthy of gifts than any other woman in the world. Let me shower you with them.”

She nodded as he slipped the bracelet over her wrist, before approaching Xander to complete the transaction. Juliet watched on in wonder. Perhaps these people really weren’t here to arrest her after all.

“We’re not that bad,” the man she knew to be a constable said. “We admire you for getting back onto your feet and making an honest living. Best of luck to both of you.” He stopped for a moment before turning back. “Say, as it turned out, a good half of the jewels weren’t exactly jewels... I’m not sure you would know anything

about that?"

Juliet and Xander exchanged a glance.

"I'm sorry, no, we had no idea," Xander said with a straight face, and the constable nodded, although something in the quirk of his lips said he knew more than he was saying.

When the second couple had finished their business, they bid their farewells and left, Xander and Juliet staring after them in astonishment.

"What was that about?" Juliet asked turning to him, but he seemed as perplexed as she.

"I don't know," he said, "but it seems we ended up on the right side of the law."

"Who would have thought?"

"Certainly not I."

"Does that make you question our decision to help Arie now and again?"

Xander wrinkled his nose. "Not really. Does that make me a bad person?"

"If you are," Juliet said, crossing the room toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist, "then you have me right beside you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Xander said, placing a kiss on her nose.

"Neither would I," Juliet said, moving her arms up to his neck as she leaned up to look at him. "Don't you ever forget it."

"How could I?" he asked, grinning down at her, "for I shall have you right there beside me to remind me."

**THE END**



\* \* \*

Dear reader,

I hope you enjoyed reading Xander and Juliet's story! Wondering

what might happen to Damien? You can preview the first chapter of his story, book three in the series, in the pages just after this one, or you can download [here](#).

If you haven't yet signed up for my newsletter, I would love to have you join us! You will also receive links to giveaways, sales, new releases, and learn all about my coffee addiction, my struggle to keep my plants alive, and how much trouble one loveable wolf-lookalike dog can get into.

[www.elliestclair.com/ellies-newsletter](http://www.elliestclair.com/ellies-newsletter)

Or you can join my Facebook group, [Ellie St. Clair's Ever Afters](#), and stay in touch daily.

Until next time, happy reading!



\* \* \*

*A Prize Worth Fighting For*  
*Thieves of Desire Book Three*

**When she fell into his arms, it was love at first sight.**

A man who read books, who noticed a wallflower like her, who rescued her from an oncoming horse with ease? He seemed too good to be true. One fixed boxing match later proved he was just that.

Damien Hondros knows his role. He is the protector of the Hondros family, one of the most notorious in London. His role is to be the enforcer, the fighter, the man who speaks with his fist. But his role is at war with his true nature, as that of a peacemaker, of a man who would rather spend his afternoon in a reading room than a

boxing ring.

One woman seems to understand that. Which is probably why Damien finds himself drawn to Grace Mulberry. And while Grace knows that the fighter is all wrong for her, she can't help her attraction to the other side of Damien, the gentle soul that only she seems to see. As a woman who has spent her life in the shadows, she is astonished that he not only notices her but pursues her. There must be a reason for it.

The clash between their families points to a forbidden love between them until Damien's brother asks him to learn more about the Mulberry family business. Damien is unable to deny the request, but fears the day when secrets are revealed and trust betrayed -- unless their love is strong enough to prevail.



\* \* \*

### *Chapter One*

## **London ~ 1814**

He wasn't going to fit.

Damien shifted this way and that as he tried to miraculously shrink so that he could squeeze himself inside.

But he was out of luck.

He sighed as he lifted his head and gave up, hoping that, at the very least, his embarrassment hadn't caught the attention of anyone else in the room.

He was sorely mistaken.

For a moment — just one moment — he caught the smile of a woman as she watched him, before she dipped her head and hurried away, no longer visible behind the marble post of the bookshop's reading room.



He scratched his forehead as he took the small book in his meaty palm and rounded the corner, hiding deeper in the recesses of the room, behind another the white marble pillars, in the corner created by the multitudes of high rising bookshelves.

Damien's usual seat was, unfortunately, occupied, which meant that if he didn't find what he was looking for, he would have to abandon his quest for peace today. This was the only place he could find it. Well, not this building, exactly, but what the building offered him. Books. Stories. Adventure.

He certainly couldn't lose himself in such literature at home.

His family may all have been well educated considering their upbringing — his eldest brother and father figure, Arie, had seen to that — but that didn't mean that any of them spent their *leisure* time in such pursuits.

No, education was for one purpose only — to prepare them for the work that would be required of them as part of the Hondros family.

Damien lumbered over to the far corner, finally finding a sofa that would accommodate his wide girth. He settled in, propped up his feet, and lost himself in Captain Jack for the rest of the afternoon.

Some prepared for battle by envisioning the fight to come. Others warmed up their bodies, putting themselves through the motions of the fight. Still others physically prepared themselves to look the part.

But not Damien. Damien chose instead to forget everything that he was going to have to do, and live the life of someone else instead.

Tonight... tonight he would become the warrior he had been trained to be.

For now, he would take solace in the only time he could truly be himself.



Grace forced herself not to stare.

A man like him, so striking, so imposing, would never take a second look at a woman like her, so why even bother trying?

But she couldn't help herself from peeking around the corner, spying on him as he relaxed into the sofa and opened the book in his thick hands. He had caught her watching him once already — she didn't want him to notice again.

"Are you watching him again?"

Grace jumped before turning to her friend, Lydia, who sat next to her, sitting next to her with one eyebrow raised knowingly.

"I'm not watching anyone in particular," she said, attempting nonchalance. "I am simply perusing the room."

"Mmm hmm," Lydia said, making it clear she didn't believe anything Grace had said. "Which is why you have insisted that we visit at the exact same time every Friday, when a certain man just happens to be here, one who you cannot take your eyes off?"

"I—" Grace began to try to defend herself, but heat flooded her face. She had never been particularly adept at lying, and Lydia had known her for far too many years to be easily fooled. "I find him..." she paused, unable to put into words exactly what it was about this man that drew him to her in such a way. "Different."

"Different." Lydia snorted before rolling her eyes at Grace. "I love you, but I shall never understand you."

"You wouldn't be the first," Grace said with a small smile. Her family most certainly never had. Her father owned a shipping company, and her three brothers had all found roles for themselves within the business in one way or the other. She, the youngest, was the only one who didn't have a purpose, who found herself lost unless she had her nose within the pages of a book, where she could take on the thoughts and feelings of someone else entirely.

"Why don't you go talk to him?" Lydia asked, crossing one leg over the other as she leaned back in her seat. They were currently ensconced in the corner of the bookshop's reading room. Grace was trying to decide which of the four new novels she wished to take home with her, although truth be told she would likely finish at least one each day so she might as well pack them all up with her. Perhaps Mr. Moon would allow her an extra two.

"Talk to him?" Grace said, her mouth opening in a round O of horror. "I could never."

"Why not?" Lydia said with a shrug, tucking one of her reddish

curls back into her bonnet. Grace had always envied the magnificent hue, when her own dark blond locks were forever escaping their pins to fall limply around her shoulders. “It isn’t as though he is some fancy lord. He couldn’t be — not a man of his size, nor with knuckles so bruised.”

Grace followed Lydia’s words to the man’s hands. She had noticed how large they were but hadn’t seen the scrapes upon them. Lydia, ever observant, was absolutely right. Grace’s heart fell as she began to wonder how he had ever come by such marks.

“I have no wish to speak to him,” Grace said, shifting in her seat so that he was no longer in her line of vision, attempting to prove the truth of her words to Lydia. “I am here to spend a lovely afternoon with you and to borrow new books to bring joy to my week. That is all.”

“Very well,” Lydia said, as she returned her own stack of books. “If you say so.”

Grace nodded. She did. For there was one thing she had to remind herself. She would never be one of the heroines in her stories. And the more she remembered that, the better off and less disappointed she would be.



\* \* \*

Damien let out a sigh of contentment as he finished the book and placed it down on the small table beside him. It had taken three visits to finish, but the three visits were well worth it. Now, what was it he had to do?

He rubbed at his forehead as he pulled his old pocket watch out of his jacket pocket, rubbing the scuff marks as though he could erase them before peering through them at the time.

A quarter to five. Which meant he had been here—a quarter to five! He jumped up, his heart beating fast. He was supposed to be at the ring by six. He should have been home to meet Arie by at least four o’clock. His brother was not going to be pleased, and Damien could only hope that he would still allow the fight to go forward.

He began to rush out the door, belatedly remembering his book. He picked it up before rushing across the room, practically throwing it across the desk of Mr. Moon, the clerk, with a hushed “thanks” as he went by. His speed caused the door to fly forward, hitting a gentleman who stumbled ahead, upsetting a cart that had been parked nearby. The cart began to roll down the street, right into the path of an oncoming carriage. The startled horse reared up and pawed at the air, ready to come crashing down on a woman standing beside him.

It all happened so fast that had Damien been anyone else, he likely would have been able to do nothing but watch in horror as the woman was trampled.

But, despite his size, Damien had reflexes quicker than most. He didn’t even think. Instead, he rushed across the sidewalk, not caring who he pushed out of his way in order to reach the other side. Somehow, he wasn’t sure how, he made it to her in time, wrapping his body around hers as he fell with her to the side, cushioning her from the ground as they rolled upon it.

Then, as much as time had slowed while he rushed toward her, it suddenly all began to move ahead once more and Damien realized where he was and what he was doing — lying on top of a woman he had never met before in the midst of dozens of onlookers on Piccadilly Street, books strewn around them as though a book cart had been upended.

When he looked down at the woman to ask her if she was all right, however, suddenly none of that mattered. For his gaze caught hers, and she was staring up at him with such supplication that he couldn’t turn his head away from those brown eyes that had caught him in their stare.

“Thank you,” she practically breathed, her eyes glistening. “You saved my life.”

“I... I did no such thing,” he mumbled as he became all too aware of her plush body beneath his. Most women were so small, so fragile that he thought he would break them even if he barely touched them. Not this woman. She was built as a woman should be built — all luscious curves that he could sink into and lose himself in.

He scrambled backward before she elicited further reaction from him, reaching a hand down to help her up. She placed her hand, enclosed in a practical leather glove, into his, allowing him to assist

her. The two of them stared at one another for a moment before looking around them and then noticing the books strewn all over the ground. She broke the stare to look around them.

"The books will be ruined!" she exclaimed in horror.

They crouched at the same time, softly bumping their heads into one another as they did so.

"I'm so sorry," he said, knowing that it must have hurt her much more than it ever would him with his thick skull.

"Not at all," she said somewhat shyly, raising a hand to re-adjust her bonnet and he realized she was the woman who had been watching him in the bookshop. "Between my hat and the layers of hair beneath, I barely felt it."

"It's not just that," he said gruffly as he placed the books into her outstretched arms and the two of them stood. "It was my fault you were in such a predicament in the first place. I—"

"Nearly had my friend killed!" said a glowering woman he hadn't noticed until now. She was as thin as the first woman was buxom, the nose she held in the air as she looked at him somewhat hooked. "I saw the entire thing."

"Yes, you are correct, Miss," he said, dipping his head. "It was my fault. I hope you are well and I am so sorry again." Suddenly church bells began to chime in the distance, and he cursed, remembering the time. "I must go. Farewell."

Before he could spend another moment as caught in this woman's spell as he had been in his book, he turned and began to run down the street.



\* \* \*

"Well, I never," Lydia said, crossing her arms as the two of them watched the mystery man run down the street with surprising quickness for a man of his size. "Who does he think he is?"

"I don't know," Grace mused, unable to tear her eyes from him. "But I'd rather like to find out."

"Grace Mulberry!" Lydia said, placing her hands on her hips

now as she turned to look at her, and it was now Grace's turn to roll her eyes. She might not have a friend better than Lydia, but she had also never met anyone quite so judgemental. "That man came rushing out of the bookshop with such little regard for everyone around him that he nearly killed you in the process."

"But he saved me," Grace protested as they began down the street toward Grace's home on the outskirts of Holborn.

"Because he had no choice," Lydia insisted. "I do hope you aren't getting any romantic notions into your head, Grace. You don't even know the man's name or have any idea who he is."

"No," she agreed. "But nor did I earlier today, before I met him."

"You didn't meet him."

"I suppose you're right," Grace said, but her earlier hesitancy had fled, to be replaced by something else — determination. "But that doesn't mean I can't discover who he is."

"And just how are you going to do that?" Lydia asked.

"I have my ways."

"You're going to wait at that bookshop until he returns, aren't you?"

"Something like that."

"Oh, Grace," Lydia said, raising her face heavenward as though God would have the answer for her. "Just what am I going to do with you?"



\* \* \*

For more, download [A Prize Worth Fighting For!](#)

# Also by Ellie St. Clair

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[www.elliestclair.com/books](http://www.elliestclair.com/books).

# About the Author



Ellie has always loved reading, writing, and history. For many years she has written short stories, non-fiction, and has worked on her true love and passion -- romance novels.

In every era there is the chance for romance, and Ellie enjoys exploring many different time periods, cultures, and geographic locations. No matter when or where, love can always prevail. She has a particular soft spot for the bad boys of history, and loves a strong heroine in her stories.

Ellie and her husband love nothing more than spending time at home with their children and Husky cross. Ellie can typically be found at the lake in the summer, pushing the stroller all year round, and, of course, with her computer in her lap or a book in hand.

She also loves corresponding with readers, so be sure to contact her!

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